From the Tea Party Movement (2009) to Donald J. Trump (2016): Nostalgia, Utopia, Populism and the Transformation of the Republican Party

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Abstract

This thesis examines how populism in twenty-first century of the United States evolved from the decentralized Tea Party Movement in 2009 to the leader-centered political style of Donald J. Trump during his presidential campaign from 2015 to 2016. While both movements share a distrust of elites, emotional appeals to 'the people,' nostalgic visions of a lost national ideal, and a utopian dream of restoring that nostalgic past, they differ in structure, style, and rhetorical strategy. This study asks: How have nostalgia, utopian ideals, and populism evolved from the Tea Party Movement to the first presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump?

The context for this transformation is rooted in economic, political, and cultural anxiety. The Tea Party Movement emerged as a grassroots protest movement grounded in anti-establishment sentiment and constitutional nostalgia but lacked centralized leadership. Trump absorbed these energies and turned them into a media-driven, charisma-based movement now referred to as Trumpism.

To analyze this evolution, the thesis uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis on books, social media posts, and televised performances. Theoretically, the study draws on the definition of populism by Paul Taggart in combination with populism as political style by Benjamin Moffitt, and the concept of charismatic leadership as explored by Clemens van Herwaarden.

The analysis reveals three major transformations. A shift from decentralized protest to personalized leadership. An evolution from anger and opposition to emotionally resonant, future-oriented charisma. And from spontaneous, reactive media engagement to sustained political performance across platforms. While the Tea Party Movement was fragmented and anti-institutional, Trump rebranded this style of conservative populism into a coherent spectacle of leadership, using nostalgia and utopian ideals to unify grievances under his personal brand.

KEYWORDS: populism, nostalgia, utopia, Tea Party Movement, Trump, Trumpism, charismatic leadership, political style, media

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Introduction

On the 19th of February 2009, Rick Santelli called for a "Chicago Tea Party" on CNBC live, criticizing government mortgage bailouts.[1] This moment is widely regarded as the spark that started the Tea Party Movement, combining nostalgia with utopian demands for a return to conservative principles.[2] In 2015, through his slogan "Make America Great Again," Donald J. Trump mobilized similar themes of nostalgia and utopia for a return to a 'great' America during his first presidential campaign.[3] Although these movements emerged in different contexts, both reflect a broader political shift by utilizing nostalgic appeals to national identity with crisis narratives to gain support for future utopian ideals.

While the Tea Party Movement achieved some successes, such as the election of Senator Scott Brown in 2010, its impact fades compared to the political rise of Trump, culminating in his election as President in 2016, and again in 2025.[4] Following the political rise of Trump, the Tea Party Movement lost visibility in the public eye. However, its political energy and themes did not disappear but were largely absorbed into the Trump campaign and the MAGA movement.[5] The contrast between the decentralized, grassroot structure of the Tea Party Movement and the centralized, leader-driven presidential campaign of Trump in 2015 invites for analysis. Not as direct comparison, but as an evolving political style. This thesis therefore raises the question: How have the use of nostalgia, utopian ideals, and populism evolved from the Tea Party Movement (2009) to the first presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump (2015–2016)?

The recent electoral victory of Trump in 2025 underscores the enduring appeals of nostalgia, utopianism, and populist style, a dynamic seen internationally as well, exemplified by figures like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Javier Milei in Argentina.[6] Understanding how these political strategies evolve is thus crucial for

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[1] Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2011): 26, 37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000407X.
[2] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26, 37.
[3] Cassie Spodak, "How the Trump Hat Became an Icon," *CNN,* February 17, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/17/politics/donald-trump-make-america-great-again-iconic-hat/index.html.
[4] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 27, 32.
[5] The Tea Party Movement, although less visible as a distinct entity since 2016, continues to exist in forms tied to Trumpism. For example, the Tea Party Patriots organization has maintained support for Trump.; "Tea Party Patriots," Tea Party Patriots, accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.teapartypatriots.org/.
[6] Vera Bergengruen, "Javier Milei's Radical Plan to Transform Argentina," *Time*, May 23, 2024, https://time.com/6980600/javier-milei-argentina-interview/; "Geert Wilders: "Ik wil Nederland terug","

interpreting broader contemporary political transformations. This thesis argues that these strategies gained power not only through context, ideology, rhetoric or performance, but also through charismatic leadership in populist discourse.

Building on the work by Clemens van Herwaarden, charismatic leadership is explored as a dynamic where emotional identification with a leader becomes the binding force of this political style.[7] Charismatic leadership can help explain how Trump transformed populist frustration into personal loyalty and redefined the structure of the Republican party, now referred to as Trumpism.[8] This is not just a populist campaign, but a media-driven political formation where emotional identification with Trump as leader becomes more important than ideological consistency or party tradition. This thesis traces how Trumpism emerged from similar dynamics in the Tea Party Movement, merging those energies into a personalized, performative, and emotionally resonant political style.

To answer the central research question, the thesis is structured around four sub questions. What socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions enabled the emergence of the Tea Party Movement, and how did these conditions evolve to support the rise of Trump? How did rhetorical strategies of emotional appeal used by the Tea Party Movement develop into those employed by Trump? How did digital media shape the evolution of populist messaging from the Tea Party Movement to the Trump campaign? And lastly, how did televised performances contribute to the transformation of populism from decentralized protest to personalized spectacle?

Rather than treating the Tea Party Movement and the Trump campaign as parallel phenomena, this study traces a development, showing how certain themes persisted while others intensified or transformed. The central argument is that U.S. populism in the twenty first century is best understood as an evolving interplay between changing context, rhetorical and emotional appeal, and media performance. By combining rhetorical and emotional analysis with quantitative analysis and different theories of populism, this thesis offers a framework for understanding how populism

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Tweede Kamerfractie Partij voor de Vrijheid, accessed January 17, 2025, https://www.pvv.nl/nieuws/geert-wilders/10454-geert-wilders-ik-wil-nederland-terug.html.

[7] Clemens van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider Charisma en populisme in de politiek* (Aspekt, 2017), 45.; Clemens van Herwaarden draws on multiple theories of charismatic leadership, including the foundational work of Max Weber, to develop his analysis of modern populist leadership in the case of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn.

[8] "Trumpism," Meaning of Trumpism in English, Cambridge Dictionary, accessed May 14, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trumpism.

evolves from grassroots protest to charismatic leadership. From Tea Party Movement blogs to slogan-driven television performances, populism is examined not as a fixed ideology, but as a flexible political style that evolves with changing cultural, socioeconomic, political, and technological contexts.

Concepts

The three concepts central to this research are nostalgia, utopia, and populism. Rather than treating these concepts as isolated ideas, the thesis examines how they help construct emotionally resonant political narratives.

Nostalgia

As the *Oxford Dictionary of word origins* describes, nostalgia derived from the Greek words nostos (return) and algos (pain), with an evolving meaning from homesickness to a longing for an idealized past.[9] Scholars Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell distinguish between "progressive nostalgia," which critically engages with the past, and "reactionary nostalgia," which seeks to recreate an idolized past.[10] As the authors explain, both forms can offer emotional anchors for critiques of the present and visions of future renewal.[11] Nostalgia thus functions as both an emotional bond with the past and a political strategic narrative, serving as framing tools, especially powerful in times of perceived crisis.

Utopia

Nostalgia often intersects with utopian ideals. As Lyman Tower Sargent argues, many utopias are inherently nostalgic, projecting an idolized past into visions of a better future.[12] In this sense, utopianism is about mobilizing collective memory and dissatisfaction into calls for political action. In both movements, utopia also operates through calls for a return to perceived greatness, combining moral ideals with national renewal.

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[9] Julia Cresswell, "Nostalgia," in *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford University Press, 2021), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198868750.001.0001/acref-9780198868750-e-3394.

[10] Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "“Nostalgia for the future”: memory, nostalgia and the politics of class," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (2017): 613, 623-4, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1321034.

[11] Smith and Campbell, "“Nostalgia for the future”," 613, 623-4.

[12] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 10, 21, https://archive.org/details/utopianismverysh0000sarg/mode/2up.

Populism

Populism, traditionally defined as an ideology emphasizing the distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite,' serves as the rhetorical framework connecting nostalgia and utopia to political action.[13] Drawing on Paul Taggart, this thesis treats populism as a flexible political form, characterized by six characteristics. Connecting politics closer to the public. A nostalgic critique of the present. A blend of right- and left-wing rhetoric. The construction of a crisis narrative. The representation of a movement. And a distancing from established politics, claiming to be something 'new.'[14] The theory of populism as political style by Benjamin Moffitt, a performance involving staged crisis and media spectacle, also informs this thesis, particularly in *Chapter 4*.[15] This addition highlights the role of television and social media as active sites of political performance.

In the U.S. context, this identification is often racialized. As Lindsay Pérez Huber argues, the slogan "Make America Great Again" is not merely populist but draws on restorative nostalgia tied to cultural and racial hierarchies.[16] The figure of the 'ordinary American' evoked by both movements is implicitly white, Christian, and culturally dominant, part of a long tradition in American populism that appeals to a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) national identity in times of perceived decline.[17]

Literature Review

Extensive scholarship has explored both the Tea Party Movement and the Trump campaign. The work by Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin have emphasized the blending of political, cultural, and economic anxieties, combined with grassroots activism in the Tea Party Movement, while Jeff Nesbit and others highlighted

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[13] Craig Calhoun, "Populism," in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2002), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-1300.
[14] Paul Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," in *The Populist Radical Right*, ed. Cas Mudde (Routledge, 2016), 160-3, 168, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315514574-17/new-popu-list-parties-western-europe-paul-taggart.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.; Based on Taggart, but interpreted through additional context and sources.
[15] Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 76, 99-100, 117, 132-5, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsdsd8.
[16] Lindsay Perez Huber, "Make America Great Again: Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremecy Amid U.S. Demographic Change," *Charleston Law Review* 10, no. 2 (2016): 239-42, https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/charlwrev10&id=227&collection=journals#.
[17] Mobei Zhang, "WASPs," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1-4, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen692.

the strategic role of corporate actors in shaping its rhetoric.[18] Ruth Braunstein on the other hand emphasized the role of religious nostalgia in shaping its narratives with utopian ideals of a lost Christian America.[19] Regarding Trump, the research by Lindsay Pérez Huber linked MAGA rhetoric to racialized nostalgia, while Arlie Hochschild emphasized emotional dimensions such as loss and resentment tied to economic and social anxieties.[20]

While the role of nostalgia and populism in these movements have been well-documented by authors such as Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, their explicit connection to utopian idealism remains underexplored, as argued by other authors such as Simon Spiegel.[21] This gap underscores the need for a comprehensive analysis that sees nostalgia, utopia, and populism as dynamic, intertwined elements. Furthermore, the critique of Anthony DiMaggio on the focus on new media in the study of populism as political style by Moffit makes it clear that traditional platforms like television remain crucial arenas for populist performance.[22]

Methods and Structure

This thesis employs a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative rhetorical analysis through ethos, logos, and pathos, with computational methods through the code editor RStudio, and qualitative close reading. *Chapter 1* provides the political, cultural and socioeconomic context during the rise of both the Tea Party Movement and the Trump campaign. *Chapter 2* analyzes rhetorical strategies and emotional appeals through the books *Going Rogue: An American Life* by Sarah Palin from 2009, the book

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[18] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 25-36.; Jeff Nesbit, *Poison Tea: How Big Oil and Big Tobacco Invented the Tea Party and Captured the GOP* (Macmillan, 2016), 3.

[19] Ruth Braunstein, "The "Right" History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America," *Religions* 12, no. 95 (2021): 1-8, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020095.

[20] Huber, "Make America Great Again," 239-42; Arlie Russell Hochschild, "The Ecstatic Edge of Politics: Sociology and Donald Trump," *Contemporary Sociology* 45, no. 6 (2016): 685, https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306116671947.

[21] Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, eds, *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2019.; Simon Spiegel, "Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts, Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, eds.," review of *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts,* by Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349495054_Review_of_Brodman_Barbara_and_Doan_James_E_eds_Utopia_and_Dystopia_in_the_Age_of_Trump_Images_from_Literature_and_Visual_Arts_Vancouver_Fairleigh_Dickinson_University_Press_2019.

[22] Anthony DiMaggio, "The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation, written by Benjamin Moffitt," *Populism* 1, no. 2 (2018): 212-3, https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-00001018.

Against All Odds: My Life of Hardship, Fast Breaks, and Second Chances by Scott Brown from 2011, and the book *Great Again* by Trump from 2016. *Chapter 3* explores how social media diffused and evolved these rhetorical visions using topic modelling and sentiment analysis in combination with qualitative analysis on two Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs between 2009 and 2010, *The Market Ticker* and *Redistributing Knowledge,* and all the tweets by Trump between 2014 and 2015 from the Trump Twitter Archive, see *Appendix 1*.[23] Finally, *Chapter 4* investigates how televised performances enabled the transformation from grassroots protest to personality driven spectacle through the theory of Moffitt on populism as political style. In this final chapter, special attention is given to how the mastering of both social and traditional media constructed a charismatic political brand, reshaping populist communication into a continuous, immersive spectacle under Trump.

The conclusion synthesizes the findings, arguing that the evolution of nostalgia, utopia, and populism from the Tea Party Movement to Trump reflects a broader shift in U.S. populist discourse towards performance-driven, media-amplified charismatic leadership. While many rhetorical themes remain consistent, such as anti-elitism, nostalgia, and appeals to the 'the people,' the way these themes are performed, mediated, and personalized changes significantly between 2009 and 2016, resulting in a new political logic where personal charisma and media performance became central to political authority.

[23] Own calculation, see Appendix A.; "Archive Listing," The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.; "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.; "Redistributing Knowledge," Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

Chapter 1: A Shifting Conservative Landscape

The Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party Movement emerged in response to the rant by Rick Santelli on CNBC live, February 19, 2009.[24] In his speech, Santelli condemned government mortgage bailouts and called for a "Chicago Tea Party," referring to the Boston Tea Party of 1773.[25] This sparked a movement that blended nostalgia, embedded in its name, with utopian ideals through a call for a return to that nostalgic era. In doing so, the rant already exemplifies three populist elements as identified by Paul Taggart. Nostalgia to critique the present, the representation of being a movement, and framing the movement as something 'new.'[26] To understand the emergence of the Tea Party Movement, it is crucial to also situate the movement within the political, socioeconomic, and cultural context.

The rise of the Tea Party Movement coincided with a period of political change. The 2008 election of Barack Obama and Democratic control of Congress dealt a sharp blow to Republicans.[27] As Williamson et al. explain, this political development, combined with the unpopularity of Republican figures George W. Bush and John McCain, created space for new voices to channel voter anger and distrust towards the political establishment.[28]

This kind of political backlash fits a broader pattern in the U.S. two-party system, as it tends to provoke counter movements whenever one party gains significant dominance. As Rogers M. Smith notes, the Reagan Revolution of 1980 was itself a response to Democratic dominance, just as the rise of Obama in 2008 can be seen as a response to Republican control from 2001 to 2007.[29] The Tea Party Movement follows this trajectory, emerging as a reaction to Democratic control, but now rejecting the political establishment across both parties due to the unpopularity of the Republican Party.

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[24] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.; Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168. Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.
[27] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 25-6.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Rogers M. Smith, "Identity politics and the end of the Reagan era," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1, nr. 1 (2013): 120-22, https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2012.758590.; "Party Government Since 1857," History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, accessed March 1, 2025, https://history.house.gov/Institution/Presidents-Coinciding/Party-Government/.

Still, the emergence of the Tea Party Movement was not a response to political developments alone. The 2008 financial crisis created widespread anxiety. As explained by Williamson et al., federal bailouts fueled perceptions of government overreach.[30] The rant by Santelli explicitly criticized these bailouts, demonstrating its importance to the movement. Yet, economic grievances do not fully explain the rise of the Tea Party Movement either.

Cultural anxieties also fueled the movement. Obama, as the first non-white U.S. president symbolized demographic change, unsettling many conservatives. This taps into a long tradition of American nativism in upper-class white Anglo-Saxon protestant (WASP) culture.[31] For example, as explained by Nancy Foner, in the 19th and 20th century, Irish and Jewish migrants were framed as threats to the American economy, culture, and values.[32] This context helps explain the traction of nativist rhetoric in the Tea Party Movement, exemplified by the birther conspiracy, which falsely claimed Obama was not a natural-born U.S. citizen.[33] This blending of political anxiety, economic frustration, and cultural resentment, resulted in a movement rooted in grievance politics, which now also found roots in the middle- and working-class as exemplified by its grassroots protest driven nature.

Although the Tea Party Movement presented itself as a grassroots rebellion against Washington elites, and thus a mix of both left- and rightwing rhetoric within a crisis narrative, more traits of populism as defined by Taggart, the movement did not completely break away from the Republican Party.[34] Instead, it sought to reshape the party from within, backing hardline conservatives like Sarah Palin. A notable example is the presence of Palin at the Tax Day rally by the Tea Party Movement on August 28, 2010, coinciding with the 47th anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King Jr.[35] By holding a rally on this symbolic date, both Palin and Tea Party Movement activists positioned their movement in opposition to the social justice legacy associated with King.

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[30] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26, 35.
[31] Zhang, "WASPs," 1-4.
[32] Nancy Foner, "The uses and abuses of history: understanding contemporary U.S. immigration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 6-11, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1507553.
[33] Matthew W. Hughey, "Show Me Your Papers! Obama’s Birth and the Whiteness of Belonging," *Qualitative Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2012): 164, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9224-6.
[34] Taggart, “New populist parties in Western Europe,” 130-3, 168.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.
[35] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 38.

Corporate interests also influenced the movement. As Jeff Nesbit has argued, oil and tobacco industries found common ground with Tea Party Movement ideals of small government and deregulation.[36] And indeed, as argued by Pete Tucker, the Koch brothers, two oil and gas industrialists who since the 1980s funded Republican libertarian political agendas, aligned with the anti-regulatory agenda of the Tea Party Movement.[37] These alliances allowed the movement to project anti-elite sentiments while at the same time drawing on elite funding and organizational support.

At its core, the Tea Party Movement relied on a romanticized vision of America rooted in constitutional purity, small government, and individualism, combining nostalgia with utopian aspirations.[38] Its promise was not just to remember a better past, but to restore it as a path toward national renewal. The emergence of the Tea Party Movement has similarities to the Reagan Revolution of 1980, which similarly mobilized conservative backlash, capitalized on economic anxiety, and benefited from corporate support.[39] Yet unlike the Tea Party Movement, Reagan worked through the Republican Party system and emerged as a charismatic, unifying leader. While his ideas ultimately transcended party lines, becoming partially institutionalized under Democratic leadership under Bill Clinton, the Tea Party Movement lacked such central leadership or electoral coherence.[40] Still, its rhetoric and populist style did not disappear. Instead, those energies were intensified under Trump, who rebranded Tea Party Movement grievances into a more centralized and personality-driven populist movement.

Leadership is thus another major distinction. The Reagan Revolution was centered around Reagan himself, a charismatic figure who embodied conservative restoration.[41] In contrast, the Tea Party Movement remained decentralized and lacked a central figure. While figures like Palin briefly captured public attention, no leader emerged as the enduring face of the movement. As Van Herwaarden has argued,

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[36] Nesbit, *Poison Tea*, 3.
[37] Pete Tucker, "Did the Kochs Bring Us President Trump?," *HuffPost*, December 1, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-kochs-brought-us-president-trump_b_583df558e4b002d13f7a8771.
[38] Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, "Tea Party Movement," in *A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199670840.001.0001/acref-9780199670840-e-1780.
[39] Smith, "Identity politics and the end of the Reagan era," 120-23.; Nesbit, *Poison Tea*, 8-9.
[40] Michael Allen Meeropol, *Surrender: How the Clinton Administration Completed the Reagan Revolution* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 277-78, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.15199.
[41] Meeropol, *Surrender*, 277-8.; Smith, "Identity politics and the end of the Reagan era," 122-23.

charismatic leadership is a key factor to populist cohesion.[42] Without such a leader, the Tea Party Movement struggled to maintain long-term cohesion, ultimately allowing Trump to harness its energy in a more personalist style.

Media strategies also marked a turning point. Unlike the conservatism during the Reagan era, which relied on TV, print media, and party infrastructure, the Tea Party Movement thrived in a digital age. Blogs, Twitter, and Facebook became the primary tools for mobilization, allowing the movement to bypass mainstream media and directly engage with voters, another component of populism as identified by Taggart.[43] As argued by Sven Engesser et al., social media lends itself particularly to populism as it allows for circumventing journalistic gatekeeping.[44] This model of communication set the stage for the unfiltered communication model of Trump where social media was a key factor in his political rise.[45] Ultimately, the Tea Party Movement deepened distrust of elites and focused on antiestablishment rhetoric through digital media. However, its decentralized nature created space for a charismatic figure to unify and amplify its core grievances. Still, it is important to acknowledge that the rise of Trump also attracted support from other actors, including some technopolitical and alt right movements whose alignment was less rooted in populist ideology but who nonetheless contributed to his broader coalition.[46]

Presidential Campaign Donald J. Trump

By 2015, the contextual conditions had evolved. Economic anxieties remained prominent, cultural polarization deepened, and new media environments enabled even more direct communication between a leader and its supporters. The rise of Trump should be understood not just a rupture, but as a reconfiguration of the grievances appearing in the Tea Party Movement. The Tea Party Movement laid the foundations for the political rise of Trump by normalizing anti-establishment rhetoric and fueling conservative frustrations. Trump went further, positioning himself not just as an ally of these sentiments, but as its embodiment. This raises the question, how did the Trump

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[42] Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 45.
[43] Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.
[44] Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchel, "Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 8 (2017): 1110, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1207697.
[45] "Donald J. Trump," Facebook, accessed December 2, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump.; "Donald J. Trump," X, accessed December 2, 2024, https://x.com/realDonaldTrump.
[46] Sean T. Doody, "Reactionary Technopolitics: A Critical Sociohistorical Review," *Fast Capitalism* 17, no. 1 (2020): 151, https://doi.org/10.32855/fcapital.202001.009.

campaign diverge from the Tea Party Movement, and how did changes in contexts enable this shift?

Similarly, the political rise of Donald J. Trump in 2015 can be characterized as a populist movement employing nostalgia and utopian rhetoric. His slogan, "Make America Great Again," refers to a glorified past and promises to restore that past in the future. Two populist characteristics as identified by Taggart can be detected in this slogan alone. A sense of crisis, implied by the notion that America is no longer great and a nostalgic critique of the present.[47]

Economic anxieties remained central. Although not triggered by a financial crisis, polls from the Pew Research Center taken in 2016 indicate that many voters prioritized employment and wages during the elections.[48] However, unlike the libertarianism of the Tea Party Movement, Trump embraced protectionism, promising to renegotiate trade deals and bring jobs back.[49] His platform rejected free market ideals and blamed outsourcing and globalism, marking a key departure from the anti-regulation stance of the Tea Party Movement. Therefore, the "Make America Great Again" slogan was more than nostalgic branding, it was an economic promise aimed to resonate with voters who felt abandoned by globalization.

Cultural and racial anxieties were also central. Global terror threats, like the 2015 Paris attacks and ISIS-led beheadings in Syria, heightened domestic security concerns.[50] Trump capitalized on these fears, promising a "Muslim ban" and increased border security, reinforcing the image of a strongman leader.[51] His campaign played into racial tensions, building on and intensifying the nativism found in the Tea Party Movement. Trump also revived the birther conspiracy on a national scale and framed immigrants and Muslims as existential threats.[52] Trump thereby also portrayed himself as the defender of the traditional American identity, which, as Pew Research Center implies, resonated strongly with voters who felt alienated by rapid cultural shifts and political correctness.[53]

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[47] Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168. Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.
[48] "4. Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election," Pew Research Center, effective July 7, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/07/4-top-voting-issues-in-2016-election/.
[49] Donald J. Trump, *Great Again How to Fix Our Crippled America* (Simon & Schuster Us, 2016), 78-9.
[50] Huber, "Make America Great Again," 239.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Hughey, "Show Me Your Papers!," 164.; Huber, "Make America Great Again," 239.
[53] Pew Research Center, "4. Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election."

Both the Tea Party Movement and Trump positioned themselves against the political establishment, but again, Trump took this a step further. While the Tea Party Movement criticized federal policies and the politicians who devised them, Trump made personal attacks central to his strategy, framing Obama as a national threat and Hillary Clinton as corrupt and criminal, exemplified by the chant: "Lock her up!"[54] In doing so, he turned Clinton into a symbol of elite corruption and oppositional identity. Moreover, Trump attacked figures across the political establishment, from Obama and Clinton to Bush and even allies like Roger Stone and Steve Bannon when they no longer served his agenda.[55] As noted by journalist Peter Tucker, Trump also benefited from the Koch brothers, who also delivered Mike Pence and Mike Pompeo to top positions in the Trump administration.[56] However, these ties remained conditional, as both Pence and Pompeo did not return to the White House after the 2024 election.[57] This demonstrates the Trump movement was less about Republican ideology and more about personal loyalty, embodying more of the populist traits as identified by Taggart through framing itself as a 'new' movement against the establishment that mixes left- and right-wing policies.[58] Unlike the conservative restoration rhetoric of Reagan and the Tea Party Movement, the ideology of Trump was more fluid, blending economic nationalism, anti-elitism, and cultural conservatism into a personalized movement.[59]

The rhetoric of Trump also echoed the "Silent Majority" rhetoric first employed by Richard Nixon. Trump used this rhetoric to frame Black Lives Matter protests as chaotic and un-American, also fitting the 'law and order' narrative of Nixon used against the violent Vietnam protests in late 1960s.[60] As Mónica Brito Vieira explains, this phrase reinforces a racialized vision of American identity.[61] For white working-class

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[54] Byron Tau, ""Lock Her Up" Attacks on Clinton in 2016 Are Used in Case Against Trump," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/politics/donald-trump-indicted-hillary-clinton-3b266500.

[55] "Steve Bannon: Five Things to Know," *ADL*, April 5, 2018, https://www.adl.org/resources/article/steve-bannon-five-things-know.; "Roger Stone: Trump Ally, Political Strategist, Nixon Fan and Russia Probe Defendant," *BBC*, December 24, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47002918.

[56] Tucker, "Did the Kochs Bring Us President Trump?"

[57] Ibid.

[58] Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.

[59] Smith, "Identity politics and the end of the Reagan era," 120-22.

[60] "The Silent Majority is Back," Donald J. Trump, Facebook, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10160888753715725.; Don Gonyea, "How Trump's "Law And Order" Strategy Differs From Nixon,"" *NPR*, June 7, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/06/07/871600378/how-trumps-law-and-order-strategy-differs-from-nixon.

[61] Mónica Brito Vieira, "Representing Silence in Politics," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 4 (2020): 984, https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542000043X.

voters, it resonated due to the defense of traditional values against cultural change, a dynamic previously seen through the anxieties about cultural change in the Tea Party Movement.

Communication strategies have also evolved. Trump combined digital dominance with media spectacle. While the Tea Party leveraged social media, Trump mastered and dominated multiple media outlets, whether through GOP debates on Fox News or through controversial statements that guaranteed coverage, creating a continuous political event. According to Engesser et al., modern populists rely on "attention maximization" to control political discourse.[62] Trump excelled at this, making his persona central to public discourse in real time, creating a closer connection to politics and the public, another key element of populism as defined by Taggart.[63]

In contrast to the Tea Party Movement, Trump absorbed and redefined the Republican Party from within. His leadership marked the transition from ideological conservatism to personalized, media-driven populism, shifting American politics into a new era, where spectacle and identity become more important than policy and party tradition. Unlike the Tea Party Movement, Trump operated in an era where he could effectively weaponize both new and old media to become the singular face of American conservatism. His political brand was no longer just a movement, it was an ongoing media event, making him the most dominant populist leader in contemporary U.S. politics. This transformation set the stage for a new political era, where ideology became secondary to the image of the charismatic leader.

[62] Engesser et al., "Populism and social media," 1113.
[63] Ibid.; Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.

Chapter 2: Evolving Appeals, From Decentralized Protest to Trumpism

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, the Tea Party Movement emerged in a context of growing economic, political and cultural anxieties. This chapter examines how early populist rhetoric took shape during this moment of institutional distrust and evolved into the more centralized, leader driven style of Trump. Therefore, the central question of this chapter is: How did rhetorical strategies of emotional appeal by the Tea Party Movement develop into those employed by Trump? This chapter analyzes two books by two Tea Party Movement affiliated figures, *Going Rogue: An America Life* by Sarah Palin from 2009 and *Against All Odds: My Life of Hardship, Fast Breaks, and Second Chances* by Scott Brown from 2011, and compares it with the book *Great Again* by Donald Trump from 2016. While neither Brown or Palin became the singular leader of the Tea Party Movement, both provide insight into how its vision was articulated, communicated, and how that messaging transformed under Trump. This chapter thus explores how these rhetorical strategies laid the foundation for what would later be called Trumpism, a populist formation defined by emotional identification with Trump as a leader.[64]

To structure this analysis, this chapter draws on the classical rhetorical appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos as defined by Barbara Emanuel, Camila Rodrigues, and Marcos Martins. Ethos is about the credibility and character of the author. Logos about the arguments and logic used to construct the messaging. And Pathos is about how and why these messages emotionally appeal to audiences.[65] These three categories help explain in what ways the messaging of Trump in his book *Great Again* reflects a transformation from the decentralized Tea Party Movement style into a more centralized and affective political strategy.

Ethos

As noted, the Ethos is about the character of the author.[66] Despite lacking a central leader, figures like Palin and Brown became prominent representatives as highlighted by Williamson et al.[67] The book by Palin, *Going Rogue: An American Life,*

[64] Cambridge Dictionary, “Trumpism.”
[65] Barbara Emanuel, Camila Rodrigues, and Marcos Martins, "Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos," in *Design, User Experience, and Usability: Design Discourse*, edited by Aaron Marcus (Springer International Publishing, 2015), 418, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20886-2.
[66] Emanuel, et al., “Rhetoric of Interaction,” 418.
[67] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 32.

aligns with values central to the Tea Party Movement by emphasizing individualism, small government, and anti-establishment sentiments.[68] The title of the book already signals the outsider persona of Palin, as she frames herself as "going rogue," and thus breaking from mainstream Republicanism.[69] However, her involvement and candidacy for vice president in the 2008 McCain campaign, emphasized by the numerous images in the book, limits her credibility as a true outsider.[70]

The book by Brown from 2011, *Against All Odds: My Life of Hardship, Fast Breaks, and Second Chances*, offers a more convincing portrayal of outsider status. In his book, Brown draws on his modest upbringing, highlighted by numerous families photos and pictures from his military service, while there is a notable lack of political imagery.[71] However, the book rarely mentions the Tea Party Movement, and as Williamson et al. note, after elected as state senator in 2010, the later alignment with mainstream Republican policies in favor of economic reform made many Tea Party Movement supporters disillusioned.[72] Both Palin and Brown illustrate the limitations of constructing an anti-elite ethos when still tied to or operating within the framework of the Republican Party.

Trump, by contrast, builds his ethos in *Great Again* through personal branding rather than political loyalty. Trump emphasizes his credentials as successful businessman rather than as a career politician, exemplified by one of the first sentences in the book: "If I ran my business that way, I'd fire myself."[73] The tone of the book reinforces this image. The language employed by Trump is simple, conversational, and direct, echoing his public speeches. Phrases like "We need to start winning again" mark a break from traditional political language, enhancing a sense of authenticity.[74]

Trump also positions himself as someone who achieved the American Dream, having immigrant roots and rising through the ranks of the real estate industry, despite being from Queens rather than Manhattan.[75] His media presence, such as being the host of *The Apprentice* which aired from 2004 to 2017, further amplifies his ethos as a

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[68] Sarah Palin, *Going Rogue: An America Life* (HarperCollins, 2009), 385-6.
[69] Palin, *Going Rogue,* cover.
[70] Ibid, 219-24.
[71] Scott Brown, *Against All Odds: My Life of Hardship, Fast Breaks, and Second Chances* (HarperCollins, 2011), 269-82.
[72] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 36.
[73] Trump, *Great Again,* 78-9.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

winner and no-nonsense businessman even before he got into politics.[76] Though critics such as Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig have argued that Trump benefited from the real estate empire of his father, the narrative employed by Trump, both in the media and in works like *The Art of the Deal* from 1987, helped construct the myth of someone who achieved the American dream.[77] Clearly, Trump frames himself not as a participant in the political system, but as its solution.

This strategy echoes past conservative figures like Ronald Reagan, who used his background as an actor to position himself as an outsider against Washington elites.[78] But Trump goes further, rejecting the entire political establishment, including members of the Republican party as discussed in *Chapter 1*. His previous established celebrity and business status filled the leadership void left by the decentralized Tea Party Movement. While Palin and Brown struggled between tying their ethos to rebellion and party loyalty, Trump fully embodied the outsider, anti-establishment identity, based on his already established personal brand.

Logos

The rhetorical logic used by the Tea Party Movement rested on its ideology of restoring small-government conservatism. Palin for example emphasized the importance of constitutional values: "It wasn't about me; it was-and is about respecting the Constitution and the separation of powers," thereby framing the constitution as a self-evident solution to contemporary problems.[79] Palin even implies that straying from traditional American values causes national decline: "I am a conservative because I believe in the rights and the inherent dignity of the individual."[80] Brown similarly adopts a logic of moral restoration, portraying big government as the source of all problems: "I promised that I wouldn't take my orders from special interests or from Washington politicians."[81] However, both rely more on identity-based appeals than fully developed arguments. Their 'logic' is moral, nostalgic, and rooted in crisis.

The use of logos by Trump revolves around a similar crisis framing but with simplified solutions. The very title *Great Again* evokes a nostalgic, but undefined

[76] Trump, *Great Again,* 78-9.
[77] Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig, *Lucky Loser How Donald Trump Squandered his Father's Fortune and Created the Illusion of Success* (Penguin Press, 2024), 1-5.
[78] Smith, "Identity politics," 120-23.
[79] Palin, *Going* Rogue, 143-144.
[80] Ibid, 384-5.
[81] Brown, *Against All Odds*, 365.

golden age. Trump never specifies what era he is referring to, allowing each reader to project their own idolized past, whether this is the Reagan years, the postwar boom, or a pre-globalized economy. Throughout the book, Trump reinforces this nostalgic logic by describing the present in negative terms: "bridges have already collapsed," "our mental health system is broken," and "we haven't been doing such a good job of that lately."[82] These phrases imply national decay and reinforce the urgency of a solution.

This rhetoric also aligns with the characteristics of populism by Taggart. A nostalgic critique of the present, a crisis narrative, the promise of a 'new' solution against the political establishment, and a blend of right- and left-wing rhetoric, while also establishing a closer connection to the public.[83] Chapters like "Education: A Failing Grade," "Our Infrastructure Is Crumbling" and "The Energy Debate: A Lot of Hot Air," clearly center around specific problems.[84] But rather than laying out detailed plans, Trump uses repetition and plain language to project confidence. He does not need to prove he has a plan, his ethos as an outsider, no-nonsense businessman offers himself as the solution, a leader who 'gets things done.'

And yet, Trump does use specific policy themes to reinforce his narrative logic. In the chapter "Immigration: Good Walls Make Good Friends," he frames immigrants as cultural and economic threats, linking border control directly to national restoration.[85] By positioning immigration as a cause of American decline, he strengthens a rhetorical logic of self-preservation. These simplified cause-and-effect framings support his promise that only strong leadership can reverse this national decay.

This rhetorical simplicity gives way to action-based messaging. The promise to "Make America Great Again" is not just restorative but implies progress through renewal. This highlights how the language employed by Trump is performative. Trump projects a path forward through simplified, action-based solutions: bring jobs back, secure borders, end bad trade deals. These proposals are utopian in tone but grounded in the logic of restoration through his strong leadership. Trump thereby portrays himself as the logical solutions to a broadly defined national crisis.

[82] Trump, *Great Again*, 120, 114, 105.
[83] Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.; Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.
[84] Trump, Great again, 7, 49, 61.
[85] Ibid, 19

Pathos

Pathos, as discussed, is about the emotional appeal.[86] Anger toward the Obama administration, fear of national decline, and frustration with the Republican establishment, as discussed in *Chapter 1*, created an environment for emerging populist appeals. Palin captures this collective rage well, noting how "Everyday Americans suffering from pay cuts and job losses want to know why our elected leaders aren't tightening their own belts," arguing how 'real Americans' feel unheard and sidelined.[87] Similarly, Brown writes: "They (the people) were engaged; they were angry. And they did not like some of the things they saw coming out of Washington."[88] These emotions, anger, betrayal, and resentment, were central throughout the rise of the Tea Party Movement, but remained distributed across fragmented channels like rallies, blogs, and books, without a sustained, leader-centered appeal.

Trump, by contrast, consolidates this emotional energy into a leader-centric movement. In *Great Again*, he writes: "The challenges ahead are many. The naysayers from the media and the political establishment are out there because they fear any changes to the status quo from which they benefit. But guess what? I have a vision and I understand the process by which we're going to accomplish our goals."[89] Here, emotional stakes are made clear, the villains are named, and the hero is Trump. The rhetoric transforms from diffused grievances into personal loyalty, positioning himself as the sole figure capable of redemption.

Where the Tea Party Movement grounded its emotional appeal in a return to the Constitution, Trump relies on a more flexible nostalgia. As discussed in the *Logos* section, "Make America Great Again" never defines which past was great, allowing for diverse projections, from economic renewal to cultural restoration. This rhetorical strategy becomes a source of strength, building coalitions through shared emotion rather than shared ideology.

Hope too is deeply personalized. Trump writes: "Most important, we need to reinvigorate the American Dream and give our country back to the millions of people who have labored so hard for so little," followed by: "Don't bet against what I am saying—I understand odds very well—because I've always tackled the hardest

[86] Emanuel, et al., "Rhetoric of Interaction," 418.
[87] Palin, *Going Rogue*, 402.
[88] Brown, Against All Odds, 371.
[89] Trump, *Great Again*, 161.

challenges and come out on top."[90] Restoration is thus no longer a collective project, it is bound to Trump. This personalization also extends to grievance. Trump repeatedly identifies the media, politicians, and elites as corrupt and self-interested. As Taggart outlines, populism frames politics as a moral struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elite).[91] In this moral universe, support for Trump becomes an ethical choice. Trump thereby completes a transformation from ideological populism to affective populism. Where the emotional force of the Tea Party Movement was diffused and historicized, Trump changed it into a singular, emotionally compelling identity. He does not only express frustration but becomes its solution.

Through *Great Again*, Trump demonstrates how ethos, logos, and eventually pathos can be personalized and weaponized in ways that exceed the initial decentralized model of the Tea Party Movement. His ethos derives not from political service but from a carefully curated mythology of a no-nonsense businessman who achieved the American dream. His logos are built on repetition, simplicity, and promises of restoration without sacrificing rhetorical force. His pathos is about the transformation of the diffused grievances of the Tea Party Movement into a singular emotional narrative in which faith in the leader becomes the measure of hope.

In doing so, Trump does not reject the populist framework of the Tea Party Movement but extends and perfects it in a new context. While the Tea Party Movement opposed elites through collective protest, Trump centers that opposition around himself. His movement is not just about restoring America but about trusting Trump to do it. This shift from populist critique to personal appeal marks a transformation in how rhetorical and emotional appeals function in populist discourse. In this way, Trumpism emerges not only as an evolution but as a new political logic, where ideology becomes inseparable from personality, and emotional loyalty becomes a basis for political authority.

[90] Trump, *Great Again*, 161-2.
[91] Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168. Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider*, 48.

Chapter 3: Digital Media, From Crisis to Hope

At the start of the Tea Party Movement in 2009, political communication had entered a new phase shaped by social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter. As argued in *Chapter 1*, social media lends itself particularly to populist strategies by circumventing traditional media and enabling the direct transmission of emotionally charged messages.[92] Where *Chapter 2* investigated how the rhetorical appeal in *Great Again* by Trump marked a shift from the Tea Party Movement, this chapter focuses on how the use of digital media restructured populist messaging, from reactive to a more personal and hopeful rhetoric.

As argued by Williamson et al., the leaderless digital network of the Tea Party Movement was built in a decentralized blog- and Facebook culture, centering around the coordination of local protests.[93] During the Trump campaign Twitter became a more direct medium for political performance, evidenced by the millions of retweets. For instance, his 2014 tweet "Are you allowed to impeach a president for gross incompetence?" was retweeted over 237,000 times.[94] As noted by the *PEW research center*, by 2016, Twitter was also a dominant medium, capable of shaping news cycles in real time.[95] This indicates that Trump did not discard the decentralized anti-elite rhetoric of the Tea Party Movement but transformed it within a more accessible and personalized media environment.

The question central to this chapter is therefore: How did digital media shape the evolution of populist messaging from the Tea Party Movement to the Trump campaign? Through topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and close reading of Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs and Trump tweets, this chapter traces how rhetorical strategies evolved from decentralized protest to centralized, hopeful media-performative leadership.

Prominent Topics in Tea Party Movement Blogs

As noted, this chapter analyzes two influential Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs: *The Market Ticker* by Karl Denninger and *Redistributing Knowledge* by Keli Carender. Both Williamson et al. and George L. Amedee argue that these blogs played

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[92] Engesser et al., "Populism and social media," 1110.
[93] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26, 29.
[94] "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.
[95] Shradha Dinesh and Meltem Odabaş, "8 Facts about Americans and Twitter as It Rebrands to X," *Pew Research Center*, effective July 26, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/26/8-facts-about-americans-and-twitter-as-it-rebrands-to-x/.

instrumental roles in catalyzing the early Tea Party Movement protests.[96] And indeed, just one day after the rant by Santelli in 2009, *The Market Ticker* published a post titled "TEA PARTY February 1st?," followed a month later by the title "SANTELLI'S CHICAGO TEA PARTY."[97] This example illustrates how rapidly rhetoric transformed into coordinated protest via digital channels. These blog post titles thus offer a unique insight into how digital populist rhetoric developed. While full content of the blogposts is not always available, the preserved titles in combination with some accessible posts still allow for meaningful analysis through topic modelling, close reading, and comparison between the two blogs.

Figure 1 illustrates the outcome of topic modeling on all the blog titles from *The Market Ticker* in 2009 by the frequency of the 10 most recurring topics, represented by three key terms. Two themes immediately stand out. The absence of a central figure and the dominance of crisis rhetoric. The named individuals are limited to Obama (Topic 4) and Bernanke (Topic 10), the latter referring to Ben Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve.[98] Rather than rallying behind a leader, the blog reflects a focus on critique of institutional authority.

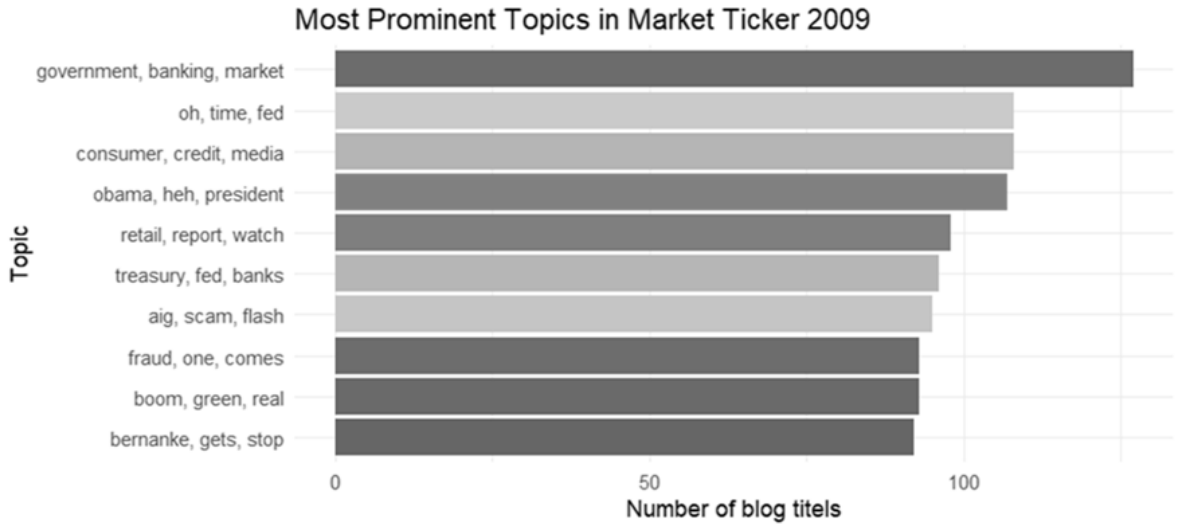

***Figure* 1.** *Most prominent topics based on blog titles from The Market Ticker in* 2009. Own calculation, see Appendix A. Source: "Archive Listing," The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.

[96] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26, 29.; George L. Amedee, "Movements Left and Right: Tea Party and Occupied Wall Street in the Obama Era," *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 34, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/movements-left-right-tea-party-occupied-wall/docview/1690106094/se-2.
[97] "Archive Listing," The Market-Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.
[98] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Ben Bernanke," Economists, Biographies, Brittanica Money, last updated, May 17, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/money/Ben-Bernanke.

Moreover, terms like “banking,” “market,” “fed,” “scam,” and “fraud,” (Topic 1, Topic 2, Topic 6, and Topic 8) combined with the most urgent verb “stop” (Topic 10) emphasize a reactive stance grounded in economic betrayal and government overreach. This suggests a framing of mainstream politics as morally and economically ineffective, echoing the early protest-driven stage of the Tea Party Movement as described in *Chapter 1*.

To validate these patterns, a comparison was made using the preserved titles from *Redistributing Knowledge*, see *Figure 2*.[99] Since only about 50 post titles per year were preserved, a word cloud is used instead of a bar graph. Although fewer posts are available, similar patterns emerge. Again, there is no leadership figure represented, as Obama is the only name to appear. Additionally, there is an emphasis on critique of the establishment exemplified through words like “reform,” “healthcare,” “government,” and “democrat.” However, there is also a note of nostalgic identity visualized by words like “history” and “American.”

By 2010, the tone of both blogs shows signs of rhetorical consolidation. Topic modeling on *the Market Ticker* in 2010, see *Figure 3* on the next page, introduces terms like “now,” “warning,” and “watch.” While the leaderless rhetoric persists, as Obama and Bernanke are still the only names to appear, the new terms suggest an intensified sense of urgency. At the same time, the most prominent topics in *Redistributing*

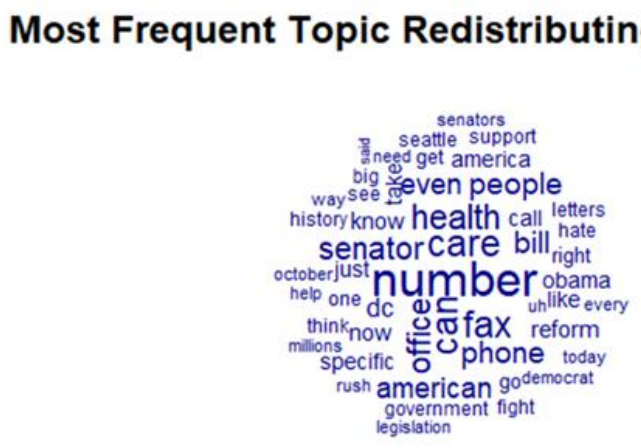

***Figure 2**. Most prominent topics based on blog titles from Redistributing Knowledge in* 2009. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “Redistributing Knowledge,” Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

[99] Redistributing Knowledge, “Redistributing Knowledge.”

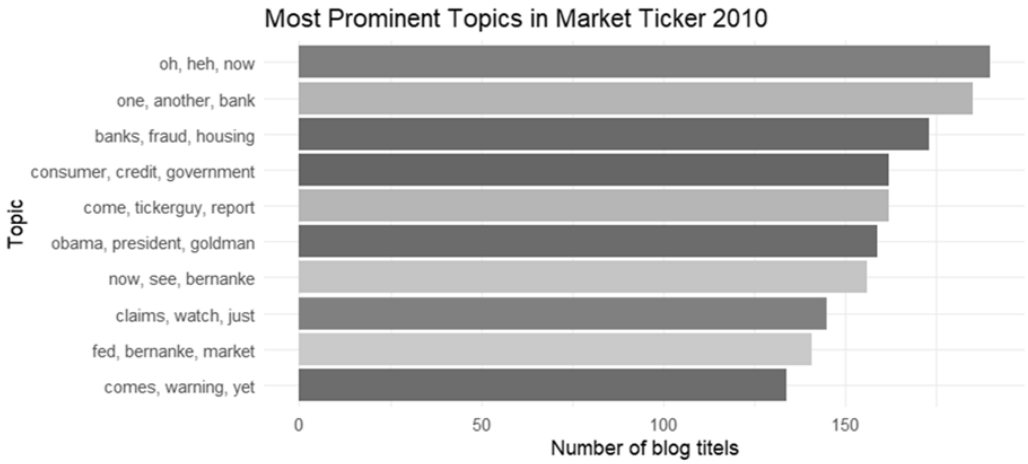

***Figure 3**. Most prominent topics based on blog titles from The Market Ticker in* 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Archive Listing," The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.

Knowledge from 2010, see *Figure 4*, reveal a form of collective identity with the appearance of "Tea" and "Party." Moreover, the words "believe" and "great" appear for the first time, indicating a shift from critique towards aspiration, likely influenced by the events surrounding the midterm elections in 2010 were Brown won his Senate victory.[100] Though still leaderless, this shift suggests the emergence of a discourse that was beginning to form a political identity with a slightly more future-oriented narrative. Topic modeling thus reveals a rhetorical evolution, from decentralized crisis language in 2009 to include a more cohesive identity and national vision in 2010.

***Figure 4**. Most prominent topics based on blog titles from Redistributing Knowledge in* 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Redistributing Knowledge," Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

[100] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 32, 36.

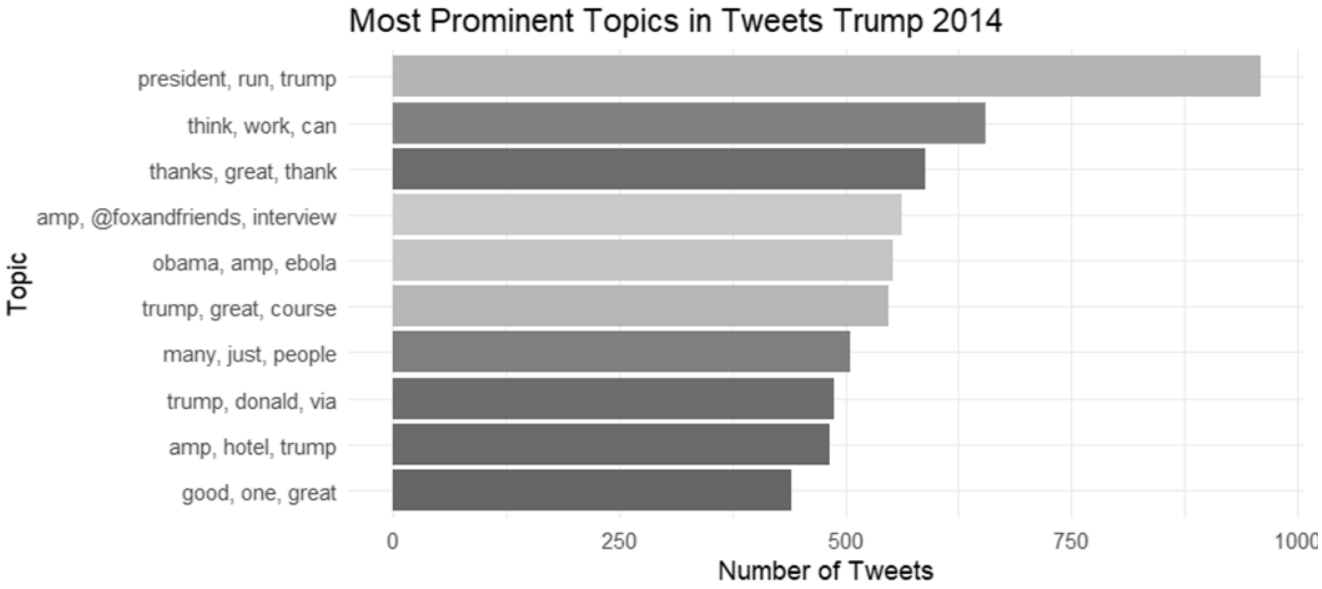

***Figure* 5**. *Most prominent topics based on Tweets from Trump in* 2014. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.

Prominent Topics in Trump Tweets

Whereas the Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs embodied a decentralized and reactive form of digital populism, the Twitter feed of Trump presents a distinctly different emotional strategy. *Figure 5* displays the most frequent topics in the tweets by Trump from 2014, again represented by the three most common words per topic. The tweets are dominated by the terms "president," "run," and "trump" (Topic 1). Even though his Twitter name "@realDonaldTrump*"* was excluded from the dataset, his name still appears across 4 topics (Topic 1, Topic 6, Topic 8, and Topic 10). This shows a deliberate centering of his persona. At this stage, the rhetoric also emphasized positivity, indicated by the terms "thank" and "appreciate," (Topic 2) in combination with terms related to action and problem-solving, exemplified by words like "can," "think," and "work" (Topic 3). This suggests optimism, not grievance. Nostalgic or oppositional themes do appear, but remain marginal, with only Topic 5 hinting at a critique of the political establishment through terms like "Obama" and "now." This indicates a strategic use of Twitter to build political brand and project leadership, rather than engaging deeply with ideological critique.

By 2015, see *Figure 6* on the next page, Trump had formally entered the presidential race. This is also visible in the most prominent topics. Political opponents "Hillary" (Topic 3) and "Obama" (Topic 6) are now featured prominently. Moreover, media related words are seemingly leveraged to extend the online presence of Trump as exemplified by the terms "fox news" (Topic 4) and "apprenticenbc" (Topic 5). But most notably, the slogan "Make America Great Again" begins to consistently appear, visible in Topic 2 and Topic 7, thereby establishing a narrative that links past decline to future

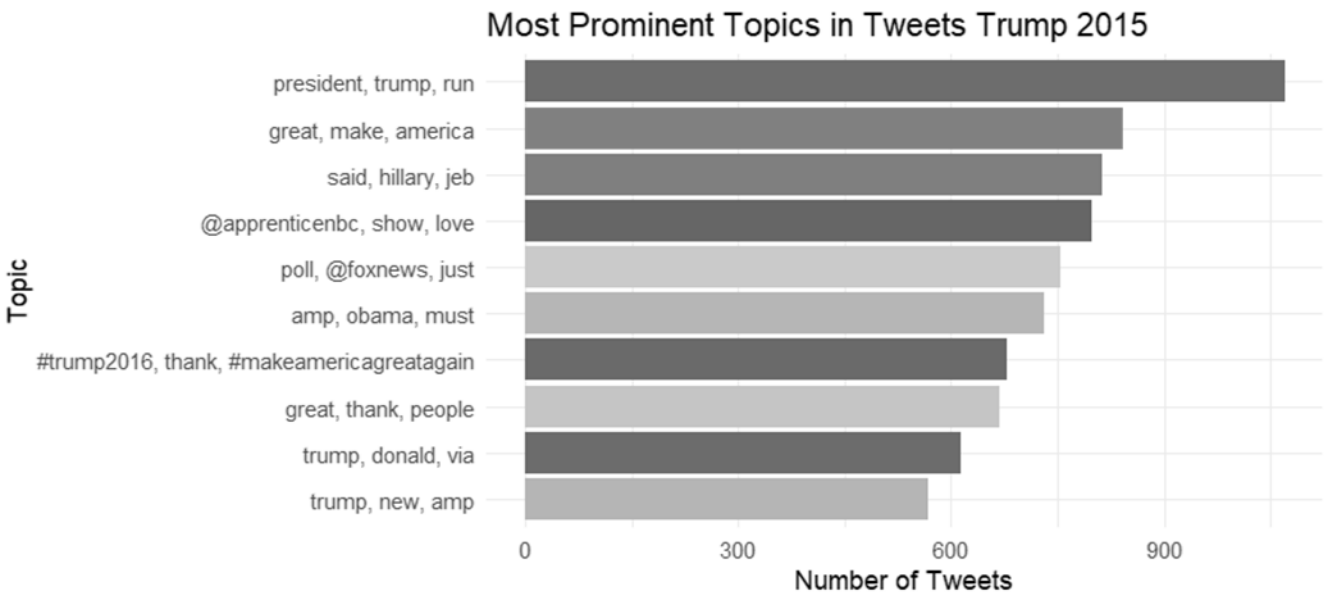

Figure 6. *Most prominent topics based on Tweets from Trump in* 2015. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.

redemption. The Twitter use of Trump transforms from a tool of visibility into a platform for an emotionally resonant, combative form of populism rooted in both nostalgia and utopian ideals.

This shift marks a clear break from the style of the Tea Party Movement. Where the blogs *The Market Ticker* and *Redistributing Knowledge* attacked institutions without offering a unifying persona, the Twitter style of Trump created a branded populism with a central figure, Trump. He became the lens through which national grievances were articulated and resolved, redefining populist communication as not just oppositional, but aspirational and leader driven. This evolution also reveals a rhetorical transformation. The populism of the Tea Party Movement was predominantly reactive and oppositional, reflecting the early protest driven phase of the movement. The rhetoric employed by Trump on Twitter absorbed those elements but added direction, and emotional appeal, positioning himself not just as a critic of the system, but as the only viable alternative.

Sentiment Analysis Tea Party Movement Blogs

To understand the emotional dynamics at play, sentiment analysis was conducted on the same datasets. *Figure 7* and *Figure 8* on the next page visualize the ten most frequent sentiments expressed in *The Market Ticker* across 2009 and 2010. The two graphs are almost identical, revealing a consistent emotional tone. The "Negative" sentiment dominates "positive" sentiments in both years, followed by high levels of "fear" and "trust." The presence of "sadness," "anger," and "disgust" further suggests an oppositional framing of events. The relative absence of "joy" and "anticipation" supports earlier findings from the topic modelling section which established that the Tea

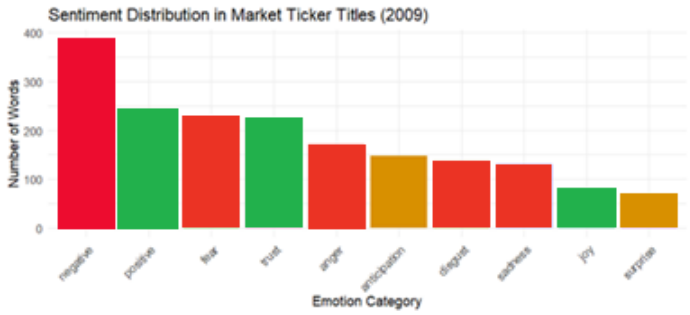

***Figure* 7**. *Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from The Market Ticker in* 2009. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Archive Listing," The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.

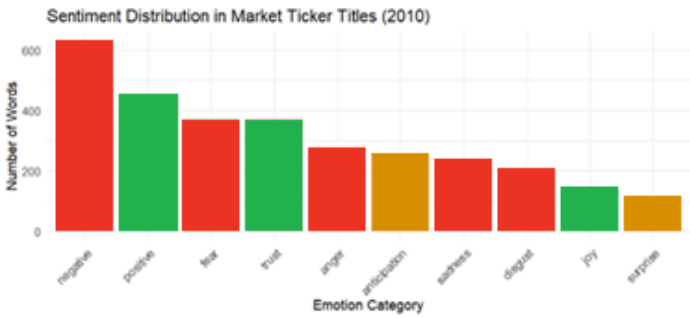

***Figure* 8**. *Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from The Market Ticker in* 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Archive Listing," The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker.

Party Movement blogs focused primarily on crisis and critique rather than optimism. The blog titles evoke urgency, mistrust, and systemic failure. "Trust" is the only sentiment not directly related to this crisis narrative. Still, this is likely to reflect a sentiment of group solidarity rather than trust in the government. The Tea Party Movement as represented in *The Market Ticker* was thus emotionally charged by a sense of fear, anger and crisis.

Redistributing Knowledge shows a subtle but important shift. In 2009, see *Figure 9*, "negative" was the most frequent sentiment. But by 2010, see *Figure 10,* "positive" and "trust" sentiments increase, suggesting a growing confidence in the Tea Party Movement as a political actor. This shift shows a development within the Tea Party Movement, from spontaneous outrage to an emerging political identity with growing political confidence. With successes like the election of Scott Brown as state senator the same year, the narrative of the Tea Party Movements seems to begin incorporating future-oriented, hopeful utopian messaging alongside its critique. The movement had begun to see itself not just as an oppositional force, but as a viable political actor.

Ultimately, sentiment analysis confirms what topic modelling hinted at. In its early years, the Tea Party Movement communicated a rhetoric of crisis, grounded in

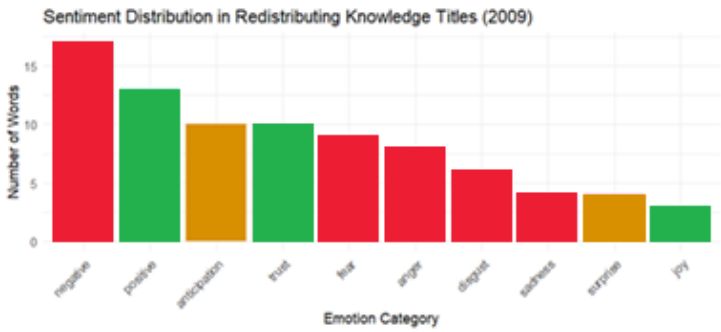

***Figure* 9**. *Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from Redistributing Knowledge in* 2009. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Redistributing Knowledge," Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

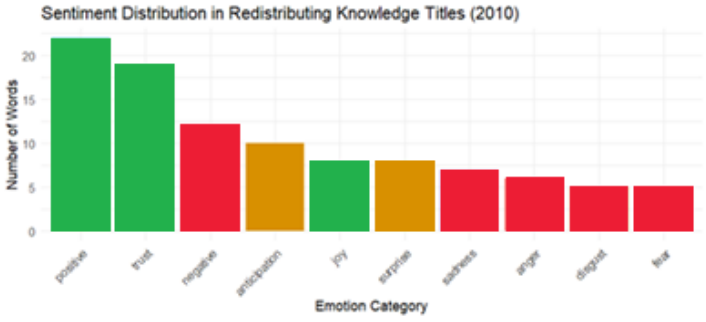

***Figure* 10**. *Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from Redistributing Knowledge in* 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "Redistributing Knowledge," Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

fear, distrust, and outrage. As it gained influence, some voices within the movement began to adapt their messaging, expressing positive sentiments moving towards a more hopeful future. Still, the emotional tone remained largely reactive and oppositional, especially in *The Market Ticker*, where the crisis narrative dominated.

Sentiment Analysis Tweets Trump

The sentiment profile of the Twitter posts from Trump in 2014 and 2015 demonstrates a different emotional dynamic. In 2014, see *Figure 11*, the dominant sentiments are "positive," "trust," "joy," and "anticipation." The "negative" emotion present in the Tea Party Movement blogs are far less prominent. This suggests that Trump was positioning himself as an answer, reflecting the MAGA rhetoric. Clearly, positivity was central to his leadership narrative.

In 2015, see *Figure 12*, the emotional tone of the tweets from Trump became more complex. While "positive" and "trust" remained frequent, "anticipation" surged, likely reflecting both the excitement and momentum surrounding his presidential campaign which started the same year. "Anger" also became more prominent, though still far from dominant. The dominant emotional tone remains optimistic and future oriented. Unlike the Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs which centered around negative sentiments, Trump builds on positive sentiments, rooted in promise and hope instead of crisis and critique.

The evolution from Tea Party Movement affiliated blogs to Twitter posts by Trump reflects a broader transformation in the mechanics of populist communication. Early Tea Party Movement rhetoric, distributed across blogs, was decentralized, oppositional, and leaderless. It diagnosed crisis but offered little in the way of hope. The Trump campaign inherited this emotional energy but refined it, shaping it into a personalized, emotionally digital brand. His Twitter feed offered not just critique, but

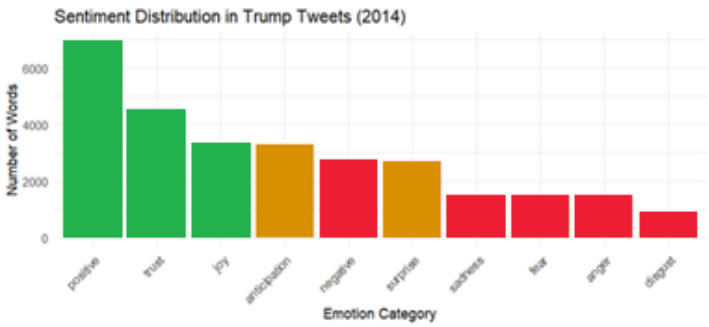

***Figure* 11**. *Sentiment distribution based on Tweets from Trump in* 2014. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.

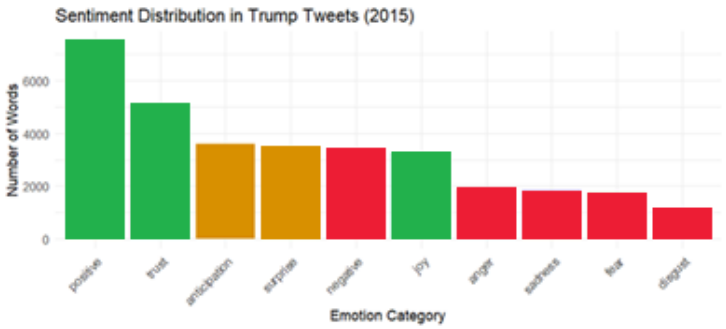

***Figure* 12**. *Sentiment distribution based on Tweets from Trump in* 2015. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: "FAQs," Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq.

direction and anticipation. Social media enabled Trump to translate and diffuse populist sentiment into a singular political persona.

Digital platforms not only spread messages but also constrained and shaped their rhetorical form. Blogs facilitated extended analysis and diffuse networking, while Twitter rewarded short, immediate, and emotional rhetoric. Trump mastered the latter in a time where social media become more dispersed, turning his rhetoric into a feedback loop that blurred the line between message, medium, and messenger. In this sense, the digital populist style of Trump was not only strategic but charismatic. It cultivated affective bonds with followers, turning emotional resonance into political loyalty. This form of communication did not just support his campaign, it defined Trumpism as a media-driven, leader-centered populist formation. In doing so, Trump moved populist rhetoric from an online decentralized protest movement to the center of politics.

Chapter 4: From Spontaneous Outrage to Continuous Spectacle

Despite the rise of digital media, televised performance remained a central stage for populist messaging. This chapter explores how television has shaped populist discourse through performance, spectacle and the dramatization of crisis. From the rant by Santelli in 2009 on CNBC live to the final 2016 presidential debate between Trump and Clinton, these performances illustrate how populist style evolved across televised moments. While *Chapter 2* focused on the rhetorical and emotional evolution of populism and *Chapter 3* traced how the social media environment changed from crisis to hopeful leader centered rhetoric, this chapter turns to television. Unlike print or digital media, television blends image, sound, narrative, and real-time spectacle, making it well suited for investigating the dramatized appeal of populism.

Television does not just communicate populism, it performs it. It stages populist figures as actors in a political drama, where authenticity is not measured by policy proposals but by resonance. As this chapter argues, televised performance enables the shift from collective grievance into personalized leadership. The central question is therefore: How did televised performance contribute to the transformation of populism from decentralized protest to personalized spectacle? While the televised moments analyzed in this chapter differ in scale, form, and intention, as the rant by Santelli in 2009 was a spontaneous five-minute outburst and the final debate between Hillary and Trump in 2016 was an orchestrated 90-minute debate, this difference is part of the comparison value. The rant by Santelli symbolized the protest-driven grassroots movement, setting a performative tone of crisis and moral urgency. The debate of Trump, by contrast, marked the culmination of that trajectory, where populist performance became personalized, serialized and rehearsed. Both moments are thus symbolic, one sparked a movement, the other crystallized it into a spectacle of leadership. An important sidenote, by 2016, televised performance operated even more with real-time reactions on different platforms, from Radio to Twitter. This duality of both traditional media outlets and social media also allowed Trump to dominate the political stage across generations and platforms, turning himself into a constant presence.

Drawing on the theory of Benjamin Moffitt of populism as a political style defined by performance, the mastering of media logic, and staging crisis, this chapter

examines two key televised moments.[101] The 2009 rant by Rick Santelli on CNBC, and the final 2016 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. While Moffitt emphasizes the role of mastering new media in populist style, the work of DiMaggio argues that traditional media like television remains important in the mediation of populist performance, a point this chapter develops further.[102]

Additionally, this chapter expands on the notion of populism as political style, by incorporating the concept of charismatic leadership in contemporary populist discourse as explored by Van Herwaarden.[103] In this sense, charismatic leadership refers to the emotional bond between the leader and its followers, rooted in a perception of exceptional personal qualities and transformation.[104] Therefore, this chapter also explores how televised performance amplified charismatic appeal and how this transformed Trump from a political outsider into the embodiment of a movement.[105]

Importantly, while radio, protest footage, and media coverage of rallies were part of the populist media environment, this chapter focuses on live televised performances because they are more revealing of how populist leadership style is constructed through direct symbolic gestures and media staging. These moments are less edited and more centered around individual figures. Therefore, they provide a unique perspective for examining how populist performance evolved between platforms and moments.

Rick Santelli Performing Crisis

In February 2009, Santelli delivered a spontaneous emotionally charged outburst on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.[106] His critique of the mortgage bailout program under the Obama administration was, as mentioned in *Chapter 1,* widely credited as the popularization of the Tea Party Movement. The performance of Santelli was not just a moment of economic concern but a populist spectacle that dramatized elite betrayal and portrayed collective outrage. It marked a key moment in the staging of populism on U.S. television in the twenty-first century.

The framework of Moffitt is helpful here. Moffitt identifies several key traits of populist style through the dramatization of crisis, appeals to both ordinariness and

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[101] Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism,* 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117, 135.
[102] DiMaggio, "The Global Rise of Populism," 212.
[103] Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een* leider, 75.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Cambridge Dictionary, “Trumpism.”
[106] Rick Santelli, “CNBC's Rick Santelli's Chicago Tea Party,” February 19, 2009, posted February 19, 2009, by The Heritage Foundation, YouTube, 4 min., 36 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp-Jw-5Kx8k.

extraordinariness, anti-elitism, the embodiment of 'the people,' and the ability to navigate media logic effectively.[107] The performance of Santelli checks all these boxes. His rhetorical question, "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage?," tapped into economic resentment and moral outrage.[108] His use of "your neighbor," positioned him as a fellow citizen rather than a financial analyst, aligning himself with an imagined collective of responsible taxpayers.[109] Santelli also performs the extraordinary, as he does not simply critique policy but also calls for action. His declaration: "President Obama, are you listening?" transforms him from commentator to activist.[110] Santelli argues "We're thinking about having a Chicago Tea Party in July, and I'll start organizing," which draws on revolutionary symbolism, invoking anti-tax rebellion.[111] He thereby positions himself as a potential leader of the 'silent majority,' even if only rhetorically.

This dynamic clearly mirrors the insight from Moffit that populism preforms must appeal to both the ordinary and the extraordinary.[112] Santelli is a journalist embedded in elite finance, yet he speaks in the voice of the outraged everyday man. The fact that he speaks from the chaotic trading floor, surrounded by shouting traders, gives this moment its visual power. The space, live format and unscripted tone creates a sense of urgency and authenticity. Television strengthened this performance. Its live format amplified spontaneity, its visualization dramatized emotion, and its mass reach made the spectacle widely accessible. As Moffitt notes, populist style also depends on the logic of the media environment.[113] Santelli therefore marks not just the rhetorical beginning of the Tea Party Movement, but a televised populist spectacle.

The rant by Santelli was also replayed across networks and widely circulated online as also discussed in *Chapter 3*. It was not simply a moment but became a media spectacle rooted in a moral narrative. His outrage was not just economic but ethical. Those who played by the rules were now being forced to bail out those who had not. The focus on 'fairness,' framed through personal responsibility and anti-government sentiment, became central.

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[107] Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*. 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117, 135
[108] Santelli, "CNBC's Rick Santelli's," at 01:08-12.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid, at 01:17-20.
[111] Ibid, at 2:08-12.
[112] Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 60.
[113] Ibid, 99.

And yet, Santelli resisted the position of political leadership. He remained a symbol and not a sustained figure. As he stated during the rant when asked if he would go to Washinton to fix these problems, he answered: “The last place I’m ever going to live or work is D.C.”[114] His role was catalytic, not continuous. But his performance set the stage for the style that Trump would later professionalize. The outsider who speaks truth, the dramatization of crisis, and the performer of populist authenticity.

From Crisis to Savior, Trump as Spectacle

In October 2016, Trump took the stage for the final presidential debate against Clinton.[115] The contrast with Santelli is striking. Compared to the raw five-minute outburst of Santelli, the final 2016 presidential debate between Trump and Clinton lasted 90-minutes.[116] Trump was not a commentator, but the embodiment of populist leadership, presenting himself as a charismatic leader. As explained by Van Herwaarden building on the theory of Max Weber, this dynamic refers to the devotion to a leader with exceptional, almost divine qualities, seen as capable of transcending traditional systems and relying on personal trust with the potential to bring about revolutionary change.[117] This transformational claim is central to Trumpism since it is a populist formation built not only on ideological grievances but on emotional identification with Trump, the singular leader that brings about revolutionary change.

His presence on the stage, mirroring his non-nonsense business persona, signaled a media spectacle of power, watched by over more than 70 million people.[118] The performance of Trump exemplifies the framework of populist style through performance by Moffit. The personalization of politics, the performance of crisis, the appeal to ‘the people,’ and mastery of media logic.[119] Each of these were on display during the debate. Trump interrupted, mocked, and rejected protocol. He casts himself as both an ordinary American and a uniquely qualified savior.

Where Santelli evoked nostalgia for a lost moral economy, Trump blended that nostalgia with more utopian ideals. His slogan, “Make America Great Again,” was not

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[114] Santelli, “CNBC's Rick Santelli's,” at 3:16-25
[115] NBC News, “The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton And Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News,” live stream, October 20, 2016, posted October 20, 2016, by NBC News, YouTube, 1:55:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smkyorC5qwc.
[116] NBC News, “The Third Presidential Debate.”
[117] Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een* leider, 75.
[118] "US Election: 71.6m Watch Final Trump and Clinton Debate on TV in the US," *BBC News*, October 21, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-37726188.
[119] Moffitt, 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117, 135.

just a backwards glance, it also promised national renewal through his leadership. His rhetoric thus combined crisis with hope. He repeatedly framed the country as broken but insisted that under his leadership "We will have created a tremendous economic machine once again."[120]

In contrast, Clinton emphasized institutional stability and policy continuation. "I feel strongly that the Supreme Court needs to stand on the side of the American people."[121] Her rhetoric comes across as detached in the emotionally charged spectacle of the crisis theme central to Trump. Her emphasis on experience: "So I'm happy to compare my 30 years of experience, what I've done for this country, trying to help in every way I could, especially kids and families, get ahead and stay ahead, with your thirty years and I'll let the American people make that decision," reinforced her image as part of the establishment.[122] Trump seized on this contrast, stating: "And you do have experience. I say the one thing you have over me is experience. But it is bad experience because what you've done has turned out badly," again playing into anti-elitist rhetoric.[123] As Moffitt notes, populist figures thrive by opposing the status quo, and the experience by Clinton positioned her as its embodiment.[124]

Throughout the debate, Trump also appealed to both the ordinary and extraordinary. He casted himself as an outsider who can achieve political success through his business career: "It's a $1 million loan, but I built a phenomenal company."[125] When Clinton attempted to highlight her working-class background stating: "I started off with my dad as a small businessman," Trump interrupted: "We've heard this before Hillary," instantly undermining her credibility, reinforcing her as rehearsed and elite.[126]

His refusal to follow debate etiquette constituted a stylized performance. The theory of Moffit is especially striking here, as he argues that populist figures thrive through symbolic disruption as well.[127] Trump acted not just as a candidate, but as a character, the dramatized embodiment of crisis and redemption. Clinton by contrast remained formal and composed, reinforcing her status as part of the political

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[120] NBC News, "The Third Presidential Debate," 1:22:20-28.
[121] Ibid, 0:02:32-40.
[122] Ibid, 0:47:07-22.
[123] Ibid, 0:45:26-31.
[124] Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism,* 21, 35-6.
[125] NBC News, "The Third Presidential Debate," 0:47:34-39.
[126] Ibid, 1:25:52-57.
[127] Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism,* 21, 35-6.

establishment. Even the non-verbal cues mattered. As the debate ended, Clinton walked toward supporters while Trump turned to his family.[128] This subtle gesture visually performed ordinariness, grounding him in relatable family values rather than elite politics, while also the extraordinariness as he is the one debating Clinton in a political debate. The charisma of Trump was thus both performative and politically effective. By embodying a crisis and promising salvation, he catalyzed a shift in how populist politics operates. This form of televised charisma, echoing figures like Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands as explored by Van Herwaarden, blurs the boundary between media performance and political revolution.[129]

The performance of Trump in the debate crystallized populism as a political style. He spoke in the voice of 'the people,' dramatized crisis, challenged institutional norms, and commanded the media spectacle. Television did not just document this moment but enabled and amplified it. Like Santelli before him, Trump turned a political confrontation into a mass-mediated event, but now fully staged, personalized, and weaponized through embodying a charismatic leadership appeal as a solution to national crisis.

From Outburst to Orchestration, the Evolution of Populist Spectacle

Both the Santelli rant and the Trump–Clinton debate clearly reflect the concept of populism as a political style by Moffit, grounded in performance, crisis, and mediated spectacle. Yet viewed side by side, they reveal more than just two distinct figures. They illustrate a broader transformation. From spontaneous, morally charged outburst to strategic, sustained persona. This shift signals a deeper evolution in how populism is performed through television.

The 2009 outburst by Santelli was emotionally raw and seemingly unplanned. Speaking from the chaotic floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, he channeled outrage over the bailout of 'undeserving' homeowners and evoked a nostalgic rebellion through his call for a "Chicago Tea Party."[130] He positioned himself as an ordinary citizen fed up with elite-driven governance, dramatizing a moral crisis in economic terms. Yet his refusal of leadership left him a spark, not a symbol. The moment went viral but lacked continuity.

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[128] NBC News, "The Third Presidential Debate," 1:33:46-34:48.
[129] Van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een* leider, 92, 108, 233.
[130] Santelli, "CNBC's Rick Santelli's," at 02:08-12.

The 2016 debate performance by Trump, in contrast, was deliberate and highly mediated. As part of a serialized campaign persona, Trump did not simply express outrage but embodied its resolution. He fused the populist outsider role with a utopian promise of national rebirth. Where Santelli mourned a betrayal of American values, Trump highlighted restoration.

Television enabled and shaped this shift. Its repetition, coherence, and spectacle transformed outburst into continuous presence. It allowed the evolution from isolated emotion to narrative dominance, turning protest into personality. But the ability to do so also rests on the mechanisms of charismatic leadership, the emotional bond between leader and audience, constantly reinforced through visual performance, symbolic gestures, and direct engagement. This emotional resonance defines the essence of Trumpism. Part of this emotional resonance stems from the personalized style of communication, where Trump speaks in direct, unscripted language that mimics ordinary speech. This creates a feeling of intimacy and authenticity in the sense that 'he says what we think.' Ultimately, television did not just transmit these performances but actively structured them. Television offers continuity and symbolic consolidation across generations. In this sense, the televised populism of Trump is not a departure from the rant by Santelli, but its full realization through sustained, repeated, and orchestrated content.

This trajectory from raw outburst to orchestrated media persona illustrates a deeper transformation in the infrastructure of populism. As television intertwines with digital platforms, the spectacle of populism becomes both more continuous and more widespread. Television remains a crucial site where populist narratives are not only broadcast but embodied, dramatized, and legitimized on a mass stage. This chapter highlights how televised performance remains central in understanding how media shapes and is shaped by populist political style. The interplay between charisma, performance, and emotional identification underscores how televised media sustains visibility and legitimacy.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how nostalgia, utopian ideals, and populism evolved from the Tea Party Movement in 2009, to the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump between 2015 and 2016, tracing their transformation across literature, social media, and televised performances. Each chapter highlighted a distinct stage in this evolution. *Chapter 1* established the context of both movements, situated in populism, nostalgia and utopian visions. *Chapter 2* demonstrated how *Great Again* from Trump articulated an intensified emotional and rhetorical appeal compared to the works by Brown and Palin, reframing decentralized protest into a personality-centered movement. *Chapter 3* showed how the social media activity of Trump personalized and dramatized political discourse with a more hopeful future narrative through himself as the solution, expanding on topics and sentiments associated with the Tea Party Movement. And *Chapter 4* demonstrated how televised performances transformed populism into a continuous spectacle with Trump as charismatic leader. Together, these chapters demonstrate an evolution from the Tea Party Movement to Trumpism through context, personalization, rhetoric, emotional appeal, and spectacle.

In answering the central research question, how have the use of nostalgia, utopian ideals, and populism evolved from the Tea Party Movement to the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump, this thesis has shown that all three elements underwent a significant transformation. Nostalgia shifted from a localized memory of lost values to a longing for national restoration. Utopian ideals moved from decentralized visions of limited government to a narrative of socioeconomic, political, and cultural rebirth. And populism evolved from a grassroots expression of anti-elitist populist sentiment to a mass-mediated, personality-driven spectacle. Importantly, these changes were both thematic and stylistic, reflecting changes from written texts to real-time digital media environments and the strategic use of performance as a political tool for mass mobilization. Future research could extend this analysis to televised protest, radio, interviews, and expanding to other movements, even outside the U.S.

Reflecting on the theoretical contributions of this thesis, this study suggests that populism must be seen as a dynamic interplay between ideological content and performative style. Therefore, this thesis argues that populism should be understood as a mediated, emotionally resonant and performative practice whose ideological and stylistic dimensions intertwine. Nostalgia and utopian ideals provide emotional and

ideological fuel, but they only become effective political tools when enacted through performative spectacle. As the theory of populism as performance by Moffitt demonstrates, the success of populist rhetoric depends not just on its ideological coherence but on its ability to be dramatized and embodied in a way that resonates across media platforms. In the case of Trump, the fusion of ideological appeal and performance highlights a new paradigm of mediated populist leadership in the U.S. context.

This charisma-based leadership has not only reshaped political rhetoric but also influenced structural dimensions of governance, from the ideological foundations of the Republican Party to how executive power is communicated and perceived through direct media channels. While this thesis focused on rhetorical, emotional, and performative dynamics, future research could explore how these transformations impact formal institutions, ranging from the role of executive orders to shifts in party loyalty. In this sense, Trumpism could be studied not just as a style or spectacle, but as a governing logic with long-term institutional consequences.

Looking forward, the success of this performance-driven populism, where a charismatic leader offers a vision of national salvation and renewal, resonates with the concept of the populist leader as a prophet, a dynamic observed not only in the United States. Figures like Geert Wilders and Javier Milei show how the interplay of nostalgia, utopian promises, and populist performance under a charismatic leader continues to shape contemporary politics globally, suggesting that the techniques analyzed in this thesis are becoming central to the political rhetoric of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the transformation of populism from ideological discourse into mediated spectacle also carries implications for broader global governance challenges. Issues like climate change may increasingly be shaped by emotionally charged, leader-centered politics. Therefore, understanding how nostalgia, utopia, and populist performance interact and evolves has wider relevance for how various policy fields may be contested and shaped in the future.

By tracing the evolution of nostalgia, utopian ideals, and populism across movements, media, and performances, this thesis has contributed to a deeper understanding of the strategies underlying contemporary U.S. populism. It has shown that populism is not static and ideological but adaptive and performative, and that its emotional and temporal appeals, looking backward to imagined golden ages and

forward to promised national renewal under a charismatic leader, remain at the core of its enduring power.

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Appendix A: Methodological Note on Tools, Coding Process, and Visualization

For the quantitative component of this thesis, I utilized *RStudio*, a statistical computing environment I was introduced to during the course "Doing Historical Research" at Erasmus University Rotterdam during the academic year 2024/2025. This course provided training in computational methods for historical analysis, including topic modeling and sentiment analysis, which I applied in my earlier coursework and subsequently adapted for this thesis.

In developing the necessary code, I used *ChatGPT* as a coding assistant, drawing on its ability to generate and refine R scripts based on the methodological frameworks taught in the course. To ensure accuracy and deepen my understanding, I cross-checked unfamiliar code using official documentation available at the *Comprehensive R Archive Network* (CRAN), see also https://cran.r-project.org/. While I had prior experience with computational text analysis methods, I expanded my approach for this thesis to include web scraping and different data visualizations, areas in which *ChatGPT* was particularly useful in generating and troubleshooting scripts.

A key limitation in my dataset should be noted. when extracting blog posts associated with the Tea Party Movement, in many cases, only the blog post titles were preserved and not the full text. As a result, the topic modeling and sentiment analysis conducted on Tea Party Movement blogs are based primarily on titles. To mitigate this limitation and improve the robustness of my analysis, I applied the same methods to a second blog from the same period to strengthen the outcome of the analysis. This comparative approach, combined with qualitative analysis in the other chapters of the thesis, strengthens the overall findings despite the noted limitation. All RStudio scripts used in the analysis, a total of 16 *RStudio* script files, are included as a zip file attachment to this thesis.

In the visualizations of lexicon sentiment analysis results, I manually assigned colors to the bars based on their similarity to one another in terms of related emotional tones. The decision to group similar emotional tones with the same or similar colors was made to help the reader easily identify which topics share common themes. While this color coding was done to enhance the interpretability of the graph, it is important to note that this approach is subjective and manually selected.

The Influence of Political Shifts in Global Climate Policy

How Justice, Institutions, and Local Leadership Shape Climate Policy Amid Political Shifts

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Executive Summary

This policy review paper is written for policymakers, climate governance practitioners, and academic researchers interested in understanding how global environmental policy endures and adapts amid political change. As the world continues to pursue the goals of the Paris Agreement with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one challenge remains persistent: how to sustain and accelerate climate action amid shifting political landscapes, geopolitical disruption, and rising public distrust.

Drawing on four case studies, the United States, the European Union, China, and South Africa, this paper examines how diverse political systems have shaped climate policy, ambition, institutional resilience, and social engagement, between 1990 and 2025. These cases were selected to illustrate varied approaches to climate policy under different political conditions. These cases reveal that while climate progress can be disrupted by leadership changes or ideological shifts, it can also be sustained by resilient institutions, subnational action, and inclusive coalitions.

The review underscores that durable climate policies depend on adaptive institutional design, the empowerment of local and non-state actors, and legitimacy rooted in alternative environmental justice epistemologies. In the EU, institutional layering and legal enforceability supported continuity in climate ambition despite fragmentation. In the U.S., federal volatility was partially offset by state-led initiatives and civil society. The centralized model of China enables rapid scaling of climate policy but limits transparency and accountability. And South Africa brings forward alternative justice-based approaches like Ubuntu as both policy tools and alternative epistemologies, challenging dominant policy frameworks.

While geopolitical instability, climate skepticism, and multilateral fatigue threaten recent gains, this paper also points to cautious optimism. The emergence of multi-level governance, voluntary frameworks like the Paris Agreement, and resilient local institutions, indicate that climate action is evolving into a more robust global ecosystem. By identifying patterns of progress and fragility, this paper offers strategic recommendations for future climate policy. It argues that global climate policy must incorporate climate ambition within durable institutions, foster broad and inclusive coalitions, and recognize diverse knowledge systems. In doing so, this review paper not only reflects on the past three decades but calls for a more just, adaptive, and politically resilient approach to climate policy.

1. Introduction

Climate change has been a central concern of international policy discourse since the 1979 World Climate Conference.[131] Following this conference, a complex web of international agreements and policy frameworks was created, to address climate change.[132] Among these, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established in 1992, standing as the overarching framework for international cooperation on climate change, providing the foundation for subsequent agreements.[133]

Within the UNFCCC framework, key agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and the Paris Agreement of 2015 present efforts to coordinate global action to mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.[134] The Kyoto Protocol introduced the concept of binding emission targets for developed countries, while the Paris Agreement adopted a more flexible approach, emphasizing nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to allow for diverse national circumstances and enhance global participation.[135]

It is important to acknowledge that international environmental cooperation has achieved notable successes. The Montreal Protocol of 1987 for instance provides a compelling example of effective multilateral action, which was adopted to phase out substances responsible for ozone depletion.[136] While the Montreal Protocol demonstrates the power of international cooperation, the complexity of climate change makes replicating that success more difficult, highlighting the need to

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[131] Joyeeta Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change Policy," *WIREs Climate Change* 1, no. 5 (2010): 636-53, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.67.
[132] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 636-53.
[133] "About the secretariat," About us, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed February 2, 2025, https://unfccc.int/about-us/about-the-secretariat.
[134] "What is the Kyoto Protocol?," Process and meetings, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed February 18, 2025, https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol; "The Paris Agreement," Process and meetings, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed February 18, 2025, https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement; Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 636-53.
[135] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What is the Kyoto Protocol?"; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement."
[136] "About Montreal Protocol," Who we are, UN Environment Programme, effective October 29, 2018, https://www.unep.org/ozonaction/who-we-are/about-montreal-protocol; James Riordon, "Ozone Hole Continues Healing in 2024," *NASA Earth Observatory*, September 28, 2024, https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/153523/ozone-hole-continues-healing-in-2024.

understand how political systems enable or hinder environmental commitments over time.[137]

The trajectory of global climate policy has not always been smooth or linear. The fragility of international climate agreements is evident through instances like the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by the United States in 2017 and again in 2025.[138] Such events underscore the impact shifting political landscapes can have on the stability and the effectiveness of global climate policy, highlighting tensions between international commitments and domestic political agendas. Yet even among signatory countries, challenges persist. As explained by Frank Naert, several countries have failed to meet their self-declared emission targets, or have lacked credible enforcement mechanisms, undermining the effectiveness of climate policies.[139] These challenges reveal the structural limitations of voluntary international frameworks.

This policy review delves into the complex relationship between political dynamics and the effectiveness of global climate policies during 1990 and 2025. This timeframe, marked by progress and setbacks, provides a rich context for examining the influence of political factors in global climate policy. The central research question guiding this analysis is: How have political shifts across the U.S., EU, China, and South Africa, affected global climate policies between 1990 and 2025, and what do these shifts reveal about the capacity of institutions to sustain or adapt climate action?

This question recognizes that the impact of political shifts on global climate policy is not uniform across nations. Different countries have varying levels of influence, emissions profiles, and vulnerabilities to climate change, meaning that political changes in some countries can have a disproportionate effect on the global climate agenda. For example, policy changes in major GHG emitters, such as China or the U.S. as highlighted in the 2020 PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency

[137] UN Environment Programme, "About Montreal Protocol."; Riordon, "Ozone Hole Continues Healing in 2024."
[138] "President Trump Announces Withdrawal From Paris Agreement," Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, Columbia Climate School, effective June 1, 2017, https://climate.law.columbia.edu/content/president-trump-announces-withdrawal-paris-agreement-0.
[139] Frank Naert, "Beating Free Riders in Global Climate Action. An Assessment," *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Social Science Research Network, February 1, 2024), 1-2, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5241886.

report, can have far reaching consequences for the trajectory of global climate policies.[140]

This paper uses historical case analysis to examine how diverse actors accommodate or resist political disruption in climate policy over time. This review is specifically designed for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in the formulation and implementation of climate policies. This includes individuals and organizations working within governmental bodies, international organizations such as the UNFCCC, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). By providing a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between political shifts and climate policy, this paper aims to equip these actors with valuable insights to inform their decision-making and enhance the effectiveness of their efforts in constructing durable global climate policies.

To address the central question, this paper will examine four illustrative countries, each offering a different perspective on the influence of political dynamics on global climate policy:

- The United States of America: This case study focuses on how political changes, particularly shifts in political ideologies, have shaped its leadership role in international climate policy and the effects on its GHG emission trajectory, while subnational and non-state actors have increasingly stepped in to maintain momentum. The analysis will consider the interplay of factors such as political polarization, economic considerations, and public opinion, in shaping U.S. climate policy.
- The European Union: The EU presents a contrasting case, characterized by its supranational structure and the need for consensus among multiple member states. This case study will investigate how the EU navigated the complexities of its political landscape to maintain a relatively consistent and proactive stance on climate action, enabled by institutional layering and legal enforceability.
- China: As a major and rapidly developing economy, the evolving role of China presents a different case. This case explores how policy adjustments, driven by factors such as a centralized political system, economic growth, and

[140] Jos Olivier and Jeroen Peters, *Trends in Global CO2 and Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions; 2020 Report* (PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2020), https://www.pbl.nl/en/publications/trends-in-global-co2-and-total-greenhouse-gas-emissions-2020-report.

international influence, have shaped its engagement with international climate agreements and domestic emission reduction efforts.

- South Africa: This case examines how South Africa, the largest emitter in the region, made commitments under international climate frameworks while also dependent on fossil fuels. It also explores how alternative frameworks, such as the Ubuntu philosophy which emphasizes community, relationality, and moral accountability, have shaped debates around environmental justice, especially in terms of fairness, inclusion, and long-term sustainability

Drawing upon these diverse case studies and a comprehensive analysis of key international agreements and literature, this review will assess how political shifts, including shifts in ruling coalitions, the reordering of national priorities, and broader geopolitical developments, affect commitments and the implementation of international climate agreements. It also examines the role of domestic political dynamics, such as public opinion, economic interests, and political polarization, in shaping climate trajectories. This review will thus evaluate the broader implications of these political dynamics for the stability and effectiveness of global climate policy.

The reflection and conclusion will provide actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing the resilience of international climate agreements and strengthening global climate policy in the face of changing political landscapes. These recommendations will offer strategies to promote more robust, inclusive, and enduring global climate action, recognizing the critical role of policymakers in navigating the complex interplay of political forces and environmental challenges.

1.1 Key Findings

- **Institutional resilience is more critical than political ideology.**

Durable institutions, such as the layered governance in the EU or environmental NGOs active in the U.S., sustain climate ambition even when political leadership changes or falters.

- **Subnational and non-state actors can play a stabilizing role.**

Cities, regions, and local actors have showed promise to fill governance gaps during times of national volatility, particularly in the U.S. and the EU.

- **Justice and trust are essential for legitimacy and implementation.**

Climate action is undermined when public trust is low or when justice narratives remain symbolic rather than institutionalized, as in Ubuntu-inspired policies in South Africa.

- **Centralization can drive ambition but must be balanced with accountability.**

The centralized model of China allows for long-term planning and quick implementation but thus far lacks local responsiveness and short-term effectiveness.

- **Local realities must inform global climate frameworks.**

Approaches that overlook social inequality, energy access, or cultural dimensions, as seen in South Africa, risk policy inefficiency or public disengagement.

- **Coalition building is key to long-term success.**

Whether through supranational alliances, subnational networks, or grassroots initiatives, coalitions reinforce climate resilience across political cycles.

- **Climate policy has evolved from hierarchy to hybridity.**

Since 1990, global climate agreements have shifted from top-down enforcement as found in the Kyoto Protocol, to more flexible, adaptive frameworks, found in the Paris Agreement. This enables more inclusive approaches but also makes global climate policy and its enforceability more complex.

2. Theoretical Framework: Political Shifts and Climate Policy

2.1 Defining Political Shifts in Climate Policy, Concepts and Examples

In the context of this review, political shifts refer not only to changes in government leadership or ideology, but also to shifts in institutional configurations, policy paradigms, and the balance between national, subnational and non-state actors in driving climate action.[141] As explained by Alan D. Heslop, political shifts may occur through elections, party realignments, leadership transitions, or broader sociopolitical changes.[142] This means that such shifts can reflect both rhetorical repositioning and policy transformations while not confined to formal changes in executive power. Such changes influence how nations engage with international climate agreements, prioritize environmental goals, and implement domestic climate measures.

Political shifts can manifest differently across various governance contexts. In the United States, the 2016 election of President Donald J. Trump marked a departure from established climate commitments, including the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement.[143] Conversely, the European Union has maintained relative continuity in its climate ambitions, though internal political divergences have required complex negotiations among member states.[144] China, despite maintaining single-party rule, has undergone significant strategic reorientation, moving from a cautious participant to a more proactive player in global climate diplomacy, particularly since the late 2010s.[145] South Africa presents yet another case, while committed to international frameworks, it has struggled to reconcile climate commitments with socioeconomic developments

[141] Alan D. Heslop, “Development and change in political systems,” in *Political System*, Britannica, last updated April 19, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-system/Development-and-change-in-political-systems.
[142] Heslop, “Development and change in political systems.”
[143] Columbia Climate School, "President Trump Announces Withdrawal."
[144] "Founding Agreements," Principles and values, Principles, countries, history, European Union, accessed April 12, 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/founding-agreements_en.
[145] Bonnie Y. Chan, "How China Is Helping to Power the World’s Green Transition," *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2025, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/why-china-matters-to-the-worlds-green-transition/; Karoliina Hurri, "'Rethinking climate leadership: Annex I countries’ expectations for China’s leadership role in the post-Paris UN climate negotiations," *Environmental Development* 35 (2020): 10, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2020.100544.

and domestic energy reliance on coal, prompting debate over effectiveness and alternative climate justice epistemologies.[146]

While these four cases are the focus of this review, they represent only a subset of the political diversity shaping global climate governance. Countries such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Russia also play critical roles in the international climate system, presenting different forms of political change. This ranges from populist shifts and military-backed leadership to technocratic adjustments and hybrid governance models. Such cases underscore the broader relevance of political dynamics in shaping climate policy outcomes worldwide. Therefore, understanding varied forms of political shifts is essential for evaluating the durability, ambition, and legitimacy of global climate agreements in a changing international landscape.

2.2 Political Shifts and Global Climate Policy

Since the early 1990s, international coordination on climate policy has evolved alongside geopolitical transformations. As explained by Joyeeta Gupta, the post-Cold War period saw the emergence of global institutional climate frameworks, driven by a growing recognition of climate change as a shared international challenge alongside increased globalization.[147] However, in recent years, globalization has come under pressure, see also *Figure 1* on the evolution of globalization from the Peterson Institute for International Economics.[148] The Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point, intensifying tensions through border closures, trade disruptions, and weakened multilateral cooperation.[149] These trends have been further strengthened by the resurgence of economic protectionism, geopolitical rivalries, and the imposition of tariffs, as explained by Peter Vanham from the World Economic Forum (WEF).[150] Climate policy thus unfolds within this

[146] "South Africa: Coal," International Energy Agency, accessed April 22, 2025, https://www.iea.org/countries/south-africa/coal.
[147] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 636-53.
[148] Douglas A. Irwin, "Globalization is in Retreat for the First Time since the Second World War," *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, October 28, 2022, https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/2020/globalization-retreat-first-time-second-world-war.
[149] Nobuaki Hamaguchi and Masahisa Fujita, "Globalisation and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Spatial Economics Perspective," *VoxEU, Centre for Economic Policy Research*, August 16, 2020, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/globalisation-and-covid-19-pandemic-spatial-economics-perspective.
[150] Peter Vanham, "A Brief History of Globalization," *World Economic Forum*, January 17, 2019, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/01/how-globalization-4-0-fits-into-the-history-of-globalization/.

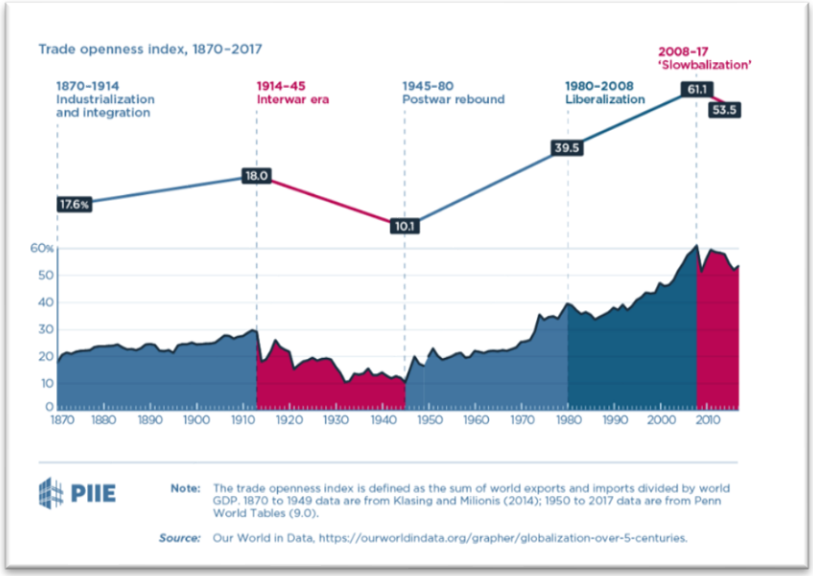

Figure 1, Douglas A. Irwin, "Globalization is in Retreat for the First Time since the Second World War," PIIE, effective October 28, 2022, https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/2020/globalization-retreat-first-time-second-world-war.

increasingly fragmented and competitive international environment. This decline of global interconnectedness has implications for climate policy. As multilateralism weakens, climate governance becomes more fragmented, with greater reliance on voluntary frameworks, regional alliances, and national priorities. In turn, this empowers political shifts to play a prominent role in shaping global climate trajectories.

In addition, structural economic shifts, such as deindustrialization in the Global North and industrial expansion in Asia have reshaped global emission patterns, often independent of domestic climate intent. In this context, current political shifts can have varying impacts on the trajectory of future climate policies. While some shifts undermine scientific consensus, disrupt leadership roles, or fragment policy continuity, others can lead to renewed engagement and strategic adaptation. The variation often depends on the political priorities of ruling coalitions, the institutional setup of policy systems, and the difference between formal commitments and actual implementation. For instance, authoritarian or technocratic regimes may find it easier to endorse long-term climate goals on paper while pursuing contradictory domestic energy agendas. These complexities underscore the need to examine the different pathways through which political change affects global climate policies.

Scientific Legitimacy

Climate policy is inherently linked to scientific consensus. International targets, such as limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as agreed upon in the Paris Agreement, derive their legitimacy from extensive research by institutions like

the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).[151] These bodies provide policymakers with actionable guidance. However, when political leaders challenge the authority of such institutions, they undermine the foundation of climate cooperation.

As noted by the European Commission and advocacy organizations like Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), the spread of climate disinformation has become a systemic barrier to effective policy.[152] This erosion of scientific legitimacy not only weakens public trust but also makes decision-makers to delay or reverse climate commitments. Political shifts that challenge scientific consensus can therefore have significant effects on the global climate agenda.

Leadership Disruption

Another vulnerability lies in the disruption of leadership roles traditionally embedded in international climate institutions. Early climate negotiations, including the 1992 UFCCC and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, were built around a static Annex classification system. Annex I countries were defined as a combination of 'developed' countries and economies in transition. Annex II countries were defined as 'developed' nations, expected to provide financial and technological support. And non-Annex I countries were defined as 'developing' nations.[153] This framework presumed a clear division of responsibilities, with Annex II countries expected to lead emissions reductions.

However, political shifts have challenged this structure in multiple ways. In the United States, an Annex II country, climate leadership has been inconsistent. During a 1990 climate conference in Washington, President George H. W. Bush expressed skepticism toward early action, arguing that more research was needed before implementations could follow.[154]

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[151] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement."; "About the IPCC," Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, accessed March 1, 2025, https://www.ipcc.ch/about/.
[152] "Climate Disinformation," European Commission, accessed April 6, 2025, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-disinformation_en; "Climate Action Against Disinformation," CAAD, accessed April 6, 2025, https://caad.info/.
[153] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 639.; Hurri, "'Rethinking climate leadership," 10.
[154] Janny Groen, "Je kunt altijd wel een excuus vinden om niets aan het milieu te doen," *De Volkskrant*, April 19, 1990, https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ABCDDD:010857651:mpeg21:a0236.

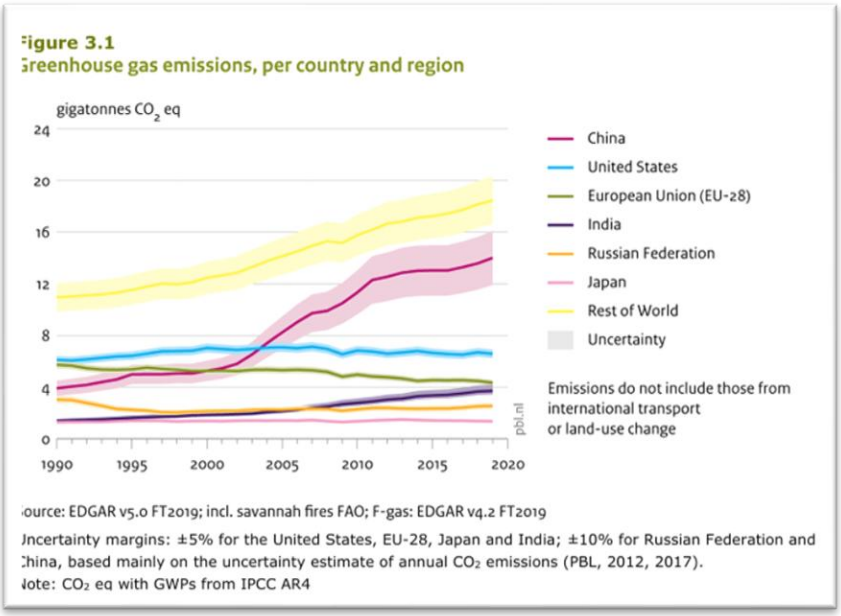

Figure 2, Jos Olivier and Jeroen Peters, Trends in Global CO2 and Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions; 2020 Report (PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2020), https://www.pbl.nl/en/publications/trends-in-global-co2-and-total-greenhouse-gas-emissions-2020-report.

On the other end of the Annex system issues arise as well. Despite its classification as non-Annex I country, China is currently the largest single emitter globally, see also *Figure 2* which shows the largest GHG emitters based on a report from 2020 by the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency.[155] While China has significantly expanded investment in renewable energy and increased participation in international institutions, its overall emissions trajectory continues to rise.[156] This highlights the disconnect between the Chinese emissions profile and its formal status in climate negotiations. This ambiguity has also led to growing calls for more flexible, dynamic leadership models. The shift toward Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in The Paris Agreement from 2015 reflects this need.[157] All countries are now encouraged to adopt national climate commitments, regardless of income classification or historical responsibility.

Policy Continuity

Political shifts also pose challenges to the continuity and credibility of climate policy. International climate agreements require sustained domestic implementation to be effective. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol introduced legally binding emission targets for Annex I countries, but its impact was weakened when for example the United States

[155] Olivier and Peters, *Trends in Global CO2*.
[156] "About PBL," PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.pbl.nl/en/about-pbl.
[157] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement."

withdrew under President George W. Bush in 2001.[158] This highlights the vulnerability of binding international agreements to national political changes. The Paris Agreement attempts to address this by allowing for more flexible NDCs.[159] This design offers resilience. If one country withdraws or weakens its commitments, others can still proceed with their own plans. For example, the withdrawal under President Trump in 2017 did not collapse the agreement, as the EU, China, South Africa, and others, continued to implement their climate policies. However, flexibility comes at a cost. Without strong enforcement mechanisms, voluntary commitments may lack the ambition or consistency needed to meet agreed upon climate goals. Thus, political turnover can still delay implementation or shift resources away from climate priorities, particularly in the current era of global fragmentation.

2.3 Stabilizing Institutional Mechanisms in Climate policy

Despite the disruptive potential of political shifts, several institutional mechanisms are already in place to promote stability in global climate policy. These mechanisms correspond to the challenges outlined above.

Scientific institutions

Institutions such as the IPCC and national scientific agencies like the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) play a critical role in situating climate policy in evidence-based research.[160] NGOs like Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF) contribute by advocating for gender responsive climate policies and promoting community-based solutions.[161] Collaborative efforts between governments and civil society, such as the anti-disinformation strategies by the European Commission and the CAAD aim to combat disinformation and strengthen public trust in climate science.[162]

[158] "George Bush: “I Oppose the Kyoto Protocol”," Centre for Science and Environment, accessed April 4, 2025, https://www.cseindia.org/george-bush-i-oppose-the-kyoto-protocol-3149.; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What is the Kyoto Protocol?"
[159] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement.”
[160]Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "About the IPCC."; "About the Climate Change Committee," Climate Change Committee, accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.theccc.org.uk/about/.
[161] "About us," Women Engage for a Common Future, accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.wecf.org/about-us/.
[162] European Commission, "Climate Disinformation.”

Flexible Treaty Frameworks

While earlier treaties relied on fixed leadership expectations, more recent frameworks have emphasized distributed responsibility. The shift from the Annex system used in the Kyoto Protocol to the NDC system used in the Paris Agreement allows countries to lead in ways tailored to their capacities and contexts.[163] International bodies such as the UNFCCC and the IPCC now play a more prominent role in guiding collective ambition while delegating leadership to national governments.

Legal and economic instruments

The evolution of treaty structures, from the binding targets of the Kyoto Protocol to the voluntary NDCs of the Paris Agreement, reflects a strategic response to political volatility. Although voluntary commitments may not be as robust as binding agreements, they offer greater durability in the face of changing domestic politics. Importantly, they enable global climate efforts to continue even when individual countries retreat. In cases where legal mechanisms are used, such as carbon pricing initiatives or bilateral trade deals linked to climate standards, economic incentives can also support policy consistency.

Political shifts, whether through elections, ideological changes, or strategic policy redirection, can significantly impact global climate policy. They may weaken scientific legitimacy, disrupt leadership roles, or undermine policy stability. Yet, as discussed in this chapter, a range of institutional mechanisms exist to address these risks. From scientific institutions like the IPCC to flexible treaty models like the Paris Agreement, climate policy has adapted to survive amid political volatility. The next chapter will explore how these dynamics play out in practice through a series of case studies. These four cases illustrate distinct configurations of political shifts. They span from institutional pluralism in liberal democracies like the U.S. and EU, to centralized planning in China, and different environmental justice claims in South Africa. The analysis draws on this diversity to examine how leadership change, policy inconsistency, and legitimacy interact with global climate goals.

[163] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What is the Kyoto Protocol?"; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement."

3. Political shifts and Leadership: The Case of the United States

The United States offers a compelling lens for understanding how political shifts impact the stability and effectiveness of climate policy. As the second-largest emitter of GHG emissions, see also *Figure 2*, the U.S. stance towards climate policy has significant implications for international climate policy.[164] However, the U.S. domestic political context, marked by political fluctuations inherent to the two-party system, has resulted in a cycle of progress and demise in climate policy, complicating long-term climate planning.

Since the late 1970s, the U.S. has operated as both a leader and outlier. As explained by Gupta, despite early contributions to climate science and technology, the U.S. failed to adopt binding climate targets in the 1980s, one of only two Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries responsible for climate action to do so.[165] This tension has defined its climate role in climate negotiations since then. The signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 represented a moment of optimism as the U.S. acknowledged the need for action.[166] However, four years later, President George W. Bush announced the U.S. would not ratify the agreement, arguing that there is a potential for economic harm in combination with unfair exemptions for countries like China and India.[167]

Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. re-entered the international climate stage by signing the Paris Agreement in 2015.[168] Crucially, this agreement differed from the legally binding targets in the Kyoto Protocol and instead allowed for NDCs rather than top-down targets.[169] This approach reflects learned lessons from the earlier rejection of binding obligations. However, in 2017, President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal, finalized in 2020.[170] This decision was reversed under President Biden in 2021, only for Trump to again announce its withdrawal in 2025 upon his return to office.[171] This pattern of engagement and withdrawal illustrates how climate policy in

[164] Olivier and Peters, *Trends in Global CO2*.; Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 636-53.
[165] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 638.
[166] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What is the Kyoto Protocol?"
[167] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 643.
[168] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Paris Agreement."
[169] Ibid.
[170] Columbia Climate School, "President Trump Announces Withdrawal."
[171] Ibid.

the U.S. is intertwined with electoral outcomes. International commitments lack continuity when domestic political shifts can end them.

Still, the U.S. GHG emissions have not seen a significant increase over this period. *Figure 2* shows that while the emissions of China have more than tripled since the 1990s and the EU has reduced its own, the U.S. has remained relatively stable around six gigatons GHGs annually.[172] While this might indicate a success given its political volatility, it would be inaccurate to attribute this outcome to national leadership alone. Not only has the decline of industry in the U.S. since the 1980s played a role in declining emissions, subnational actors, states, cities, the private sector, and civil society have also played as a critical buffer.[173]

California offers a prime example. Through its cap-and-trade program, vehicle emissions standards, and climate investment strategies, it has acted as a leader in national climate policy.[174] Another example, Boulder in Colorado, became the first U.S. city to introduce a voter-approved carbon tax in 2006.[175] Similarly, civil society organizations like the US Climate Action Network (USCAN) or Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF), have advanced inclusive and sustainable climate policies across the U.S.[176] These decentralized efforts ensure continuity amid political disruption in long-term policies.

Yet, these gains are under constant threat from climate disinformation which has proven to be more than a side issue. As argued by institutions such as NASA and the IPCC, while there is a strong scientific consensus on human induced climate change, large segments of the American public remain skeptical.[177] As early as 2006,

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[172] PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, "About PBL."
[173] Kevin Bahr, "U.S. Manufacturing Employment: A Long-Term Perspective," *University of Wisconsin Stevens Point College of Professional Studies Blog*, January 29, 2025, https://blog.uwsp.edu/cps/2025/01/29/u-s-manufacturing-employment-a-long-term-perspective/.
[174] "Greenhouse Gas Cap-and-Trade Program," Public Utilities Commission, State of California, accessed May 2, 2025, https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/industries-and-topics/natural-gas/greenhouse-gas-cap-and-trade-program.
[175] "Carbon Tax Basics," Market-Based Policies, Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, last updated May 2024, https://www.c2es.org/content/carbon-tax-basics/.
[176] "Our Partners," Women Engage for a Common Future, accessed March 26, 2025, https://www.wecf.org/our-partners/.; "US Climate Action Network's (USCAN) Mission is to build trust and alignments among members to fight climate change in a just and equitable way.," US Climate Action Network, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.usclimatenetwork.org.
[177] "Do Scientists Agree on Climate Change?," NASA Science, accessed April 5, 2025, https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/faq/do-scientists-agree-on-climate-change/; Core Writing

surveys from *Time Magazine* and *ABC News* revealed that half of the American population did not believe climate science was settled.[178] This skepticism as Naomi Oreskes et al. have shown, is also deliberately manufactured.[179] Fossil fuel lobbies have been using think tanks and media influence to create a sense of controversy over climate science.[180]

The rise of social media has further amplified these dynamics. As Treen et al. highlight, digital platforms have algorithms which tend to promote sensational content.[181] When users engage with misleading narratives, whether critically or supportive, platforms diffuse those narratives, creating a feedback loop in which misinformation and disinformation is shared, commented on, and algorithmically promoted, reinforcing identity-based positions on climate change.[182] This makes the debate less about facts and more about political affiliation. In such a landscape, societal consensus on climate policy becomes increasingly difficult.

Lessons learned

Polarization has institutional consequences. While voluntary frameworks like the Paris Agreement allow for re-entry, the reliance on self-imposed targets means that backsliding is easy and enforcement is minimal. At the same time, non-binding agreements have proven more durable under shifting leadership. The move away from the Kyoto Protocol has, paradoxically, made climate policy more adaptable but makes it more difficult to enforce.

Still the relatively stable emission trajectory in the U.S., especially given its shifting political landscape, show that institutional momentum matters. Civil society,

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Team, *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023* (IPCC, 2023), 52, 101, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/.

[178] Naomi Oreskes, Erik Conway, David J. Karoly, Joelle Gergis, Urs Neu, and Christian Pfister, "The Denial of Global Warming," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, ed. Sam White, Christian Pfister, and Franz Mauelshagen (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 150, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43020-5_14.

[179] Oreskes, et al., "The Denial of Global Warming," 152-60.

[180] Ibid, 152-60.

[181] Kathie M. d'I. Treen, Hywel T. P. Williams, and Saffron J. O'Neill, "Online Misinformation about Climate Change," *WIREs Climate Change* 11, no. 5 (2020): 4-5, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.665.

[182] Treen, Williams, and O'Neill, "Online Misinformation," 4-5.

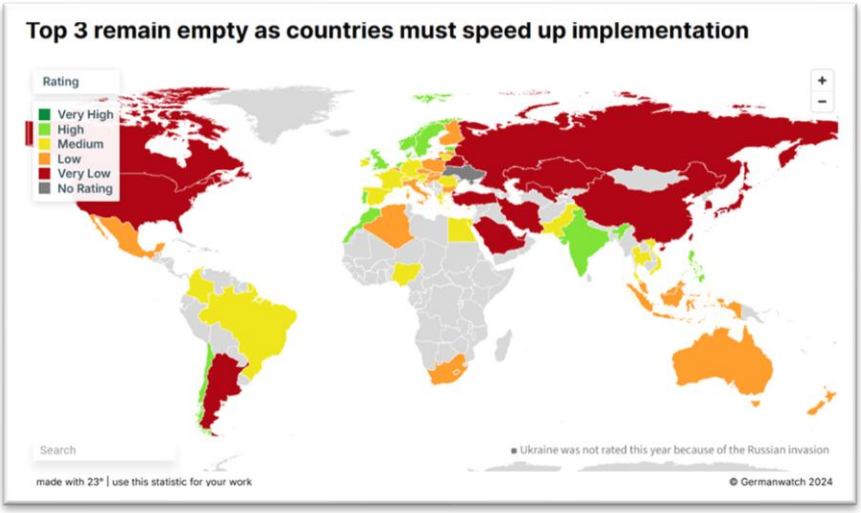

Figure 3, "CCPI 2025: Ranking and Results," Climate Change Performance Index, accessed February 20, 2025, https://ccpi.org/.

local initiatives influence the effectiveness of climate action. However, stability is not the same as progress. If the U.S. is to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, particularly the 1.5°C warming limit below preindustrial levels, it must not just stabilize but decline GHG emissions, an issue also raised by the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), see *Figure 3*.

This case underscores that the U.S. is a battleground in climate policy. It embodies the broader struggle over how science, politics, and identity interact in climate policy. In many ways, it is a test for the resilience of international agreements. Can a system designed around voluntary action survive volatile stances on climate action by one of its most influential members? Can subnational action compensate for federal retreat? And can public opinion support coherent climate policy on a broader societal scale?

While there are multiple lessons to learn from this case, they are not neatly packaged. They reflect tensions rather than tidy conclusions. Flexibility in governance models helps with re-engagement but weakens enforcement. Civil society can sustain climate ambition, but only to a point. And disinformation blurs the line between knowledge and belief, eroding democratic support for science-based policy.

The U.S. case invites a rethinking of what resilience in climate policy means. It suggests that resilience is not just about institutions that endure, but about systems that can function and adapt even when trust, leadership, or public consensus demises.

In this sense, the U.S. is a place where fragmentation is visible, but also a place where innovation continues to push against the limits of what is politically possible.

4. Stability Despite Divisions: The Case of Europe

The European Union presents a different case. Despite significant internal diversity and recurring political disruption, including four rounds of enlargement and the departure of the United Kingdom in 2020 after the 2016 Brexit referendum, the EU remains the only major region to have reduced its GHG emissions from roughly 6 gigatons in 1990 to 4 gigatons by 2020, see *Figure 2*.[183] Authors such as Karoliina Hurri have noted that the EU has also maintained a relatively proactive stance on climate policy since the early 1990s.[184] However, this achievement must be interpreted with caution. Part of the emissions decline reflects broader structural shifts in its economy, including significant deindustrialization, particularly in heavy industry sectors, which has proceeded more rapidly compared to other major economies.[185] This dynamic complicates the narrative of policy-led success and raises questions about the effectiveness of EU climate strategies, something also questioned by Nico Palesch from *Oxford Economics* who argues that this period of deindustrialization resembles an industrial recession, likely to be followed by a recovery from 2025 onwards.[186]

Nevertheless, the continuity of EU climate ambition is striking given that the EU is a supranational union consisting of 27 member states with diverse interests, economic capacities, and political ideologies.[187] This raises two central questions: How have political transitions and internal divisions shaped the trajectory of EU climate policy? And what institutional mechanisms have enabled the EU to sustain climate ambition despite such pressures?

The early EU climate leadership was more declarative than effective. As Claire Dupont and Sebastian Oberthür have pointed out, although the 1990s marked a period of high climate ambition, policy implementation was slow and often failed.[188] The

[183] "EU Enlargement," Principles, countries, history, European Union, accessed April 12, 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.
[184] Hurri, "'Rethinking climate leadership," 10.
[185] Nico Palesch, “Claims of deindustrialisation in Europe are overblown,” Oxford Economics, accessed May 15, 2025, https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/claims-of-deindustrialisation-in-europe-are-overblown/.
[186] Nico Palesch, “Claims of deinsutrialisation in Europe.”
[187] European Union, "Founding Agreements.”
[188] Claire Dupont and Sebastian Oberthür, "Chapter 20: The European Union," in *Research Handbook on Climate Governance,* ed. Karin Bäckstrand and Eva Lövbrand (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), 225, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783470600.

failure of the proposed CO2 tax in the early 1990s and the slow implementation of the Kyoto Protocol from 1997 reflect the limited institutional capacity during that era.[189] Moreover, the PBL report from 2020, see *Figure 2*, shows that between 1990 and 2000 GHG reductions were fairly modest.[190]

The turning point came in the early 2000s. With the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and the launch of the European Climate Change Program (ECCP) in 2000, the EU began developing concrete policy instruments.[191] A prime example would be the creation of the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), introduced in 2005 as the first major global carbon market.[192] By assigning a price to GHG emissions and making polluting parties financially accountable, the EU ETS signaled a shift from ambition to institutionalized enforcement. This marked the beginning of a more robust and integrated approach to climate policy.

This momentum was soon tested. The EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 brought 12 new member states, many of which, such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania, had more carbon intensive economies and less public support for climate action.[193] The 2008 financial crisis further complicated consensus building. Jakob Skovgaard highlights how attempts to raise the 2009 emission reduction target by 20 percent was met with strong resistance from a coalition led by Poland, joined by Italy, Hungary, and Romania.[194] These episodes illustrate that the as the EU grew, so did the diversity of political and economic interests.

Public attitudes mirror this divergence. As shown in *Figure 4* below, surveys from the European Union indicate that citizens in newer member states consistently reported lower levels of personal climate action compared to respondents in older member states.[195] The broader implication of this internal diversity introduces

[189] Dupont and Oberthür, “Chapter 20,” 225.
[190] Olivier and Peters, *Trends in Global CO2*.
[191] Dupont en Oberthür, "Chapter 20," 225.
[192] "About the EU ETS," European Commission, accessed April 12, 2025, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/eu-emissions-trading-system-eu-ets/about-eu-ets_en; Dupont and Oberthür, "Chapter 20," 225-27.
[193] Jakob Skovgaard, "EU climate policy after the crisis," *Environmental Politics* 23, no. 1 (2014): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.818304.
[194] Skovgaard, "EU climate policy after the crisis," 4.
[195] European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 538 Climate Change* (European Commission, 2023), https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2954.

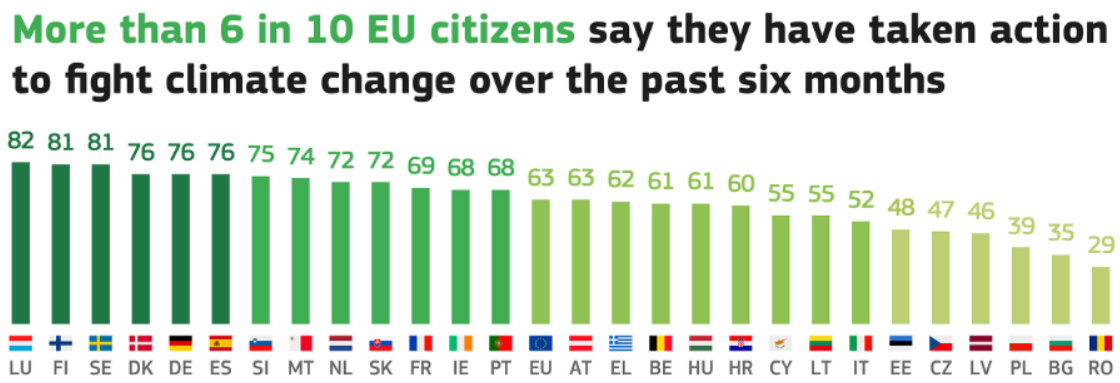

Figure 4, European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 538 Climate Change (European Commission), 2023. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2954.

structural fragmentation into EU climate policy. The question then is not whether the EU has faced political disruption, but why have such disruptions not derailed its overall climate ambition.

A key explanation lies in the institutional architecture of the EU, which embeds climate objectives into a multilayered governance system. This design acts as a buffer against short-term political fluctuations and national level volatility. The European Environment Agency (EEA) established in 1994, for example, plays a crucial role by producing independent data and monitoring progress toward climate goals.[196] Because it operates at a supranational level, the EEA is relatively isolated from member-state politics and thus provides a continuous flow of climate intelligence to policymakers in the EU.

The European Commission is another example, as one of the key executive bodies of the EU, it has consistently prioritized climate change, framing it as an existential threat requiring urgent action.[197] The European Commission is supported by a subset of expert bodies that keep climate policy on the agenda.[198] As a result, even when national governments shift positions, the institutional commitment to climate policy remains largely intact.

EU decision-making does not depend on unanimity. So long as a coalition of willing member states continue to advocate for climate action, those voices can sustain

[196] "Who We Are," European Environment Agency, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/about/who-we-are.
[197] "Climate Change," European Commission, accessed April 14, 2025, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/climate-change_en.
[198] "A Stronger Europe in the World," European Commission, accessed November 8, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/stronger-europe-world_en.

pressure within EU institutions. In this context, pluralism becomes a source of continuity. Therefore, climate progressive member states, backed by NGOs and coalitions, maintain constant pressure on EU institutions to uphold or enhance environmental commitments. This distributed form of leadership has helped to mainstream climate goals within the broader EU policy framework.

Another cornerstone of EU resilience is its ability to translate targets into legal commitments. The European Green Deal, launched in 2019, marks a significant shift in this direction, committing the EU to net-zero GHG emissions by 2050.[199] This ambition was also solidified in the 2021 European Climate Law, which introduced mechanisms for monitoring and accountability.[200] However, the trajectory of the Green Deal also underscores the limits of institutional insulation. Under the Von der Leyen Commission, and particularly in response to geopolitical disruptions such as the war in Ukraine and rising energy insecurity, key components of the Green Deal have been softened or postponed.[201] In 2024, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has stressed the need for adaptation and a restructuring of the Green Deal in the face of new realities, underscoring that policy on paper is not always the same as its outcomes.[202] While the Green Deal illustrates the EU capacity to embed climate goals in legal frameworks, it also reveals how institutional commitment is not immune to external shocks and political realignment. Legal enforceability can slow down reversal, but it cannot guarantee future ambition.

Lessons Learned

The EU case offers several insights into how institutional design can enable sustained climate policy, even in the face of significant internal political diversity and disruption. While the EU is often presented as a unified climate leader, the EU is shaped by

[199] "The European Green Deal," priorities 2019-2024, European Commission, accessed November 8, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.
[200] European Commission, "The European Green Deal."
[201] Niall Walsh and Mak Kasapovic, "The EU Is on Course to Dilute Its Green Agenda," Oxford Analytica, effective March 5, 2025, https://www.oxan.com/insights/the-eu-is-on-course-to-dilute-its-green-agenda/.
[202] "EESC Calls for Recalibration of the EU Green Deal to Address Emerging Challenges," European Green Deal, News, European Economic and Social Committee, effective September 25, 2024, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/eesc-calls-recalibration-eu-green-deal-address-emerging-challenges.

complex politics that shape its policymaking. What makes the EU distinct is not the absence of fragmentation but the way its institutional structure transforms this fragmentation into a source of continuous ambition.

A key lesson from the EU is that institutional layering, embedding climate policy across multiple levels and bodies, can help maintain long-term policy commitments from short-term political shifts. From the European Commission to the EEA, EU institutions operate with a degree of autonomy from national politics, allowing them to maintain climate issues on the policy agenda even when public sentiment or electoral outcomes might suggest otherwise. This redundancy creates stability by ensuring that no single actor or electoral outcome can derail overall climate ambition.

The capacity of the EU to make climate targets legally binding also marks a significant departure from the frameworks that characterize contemporary global climate policy. The introduction of the European Climate Law in 2021, which enshrines the net-zero 2050 target into binding legislation, exemplifies how supranational legal authority can transform political ambition into enforceable policy. This capacity to legislate across national boundaries adds a degree of credibility and permanence to EU climate commitments.

Yet, it would be misleading to frame the EU as purely successful. Much of its early emissions decline can be attributed to post-industrial shifts and deindustrialization, rather than direct policy success. Moreover, geopolitical tensions and energy security concerns have softened components of The Green Deal, suggesting that even robust legal frameworks are vulnerable to shifting geopolitical and economic realities.

Still, the EU demonstrates that internal diversity does not have to undermine climate ambition. While growing membership and varied national interests have complicated negotiations, they have not paralyzed the system. Instead, climate leadership has often come from a coalition of progressive member states, supported by civil society and scientific bodies. This distributed leadership ensures that, even in times of economic or political crisis, there are always actors within the system pushing to maintain or enhance environmental commitments. It is this very pluralism that makes sudden reversals less likely. Because climate policies are shared across member states, the agenda persists even in periods of contestation.

5. Centralized Climate Policy and Long-Term Strategy: The Case of China

The case of China presents another distinct case. Unlike the EU and U.S., which have long positioned themselves as leaders in international climate negotiations, China entered the global climate arena from a different starting point. As a Non-Annex I country under the UNFCCC framework, China was historically classified as a developing nation and thus not expected to lead emission reductions under early agreements like the Kyoto Protocol.[203] Nevertheless, China participated in early international climate agreements, including signing the UNFCCC treaty from 1992, and the Kyoto Protocol in 1997.[204]

The rapid economic transition of China following market reforms in the late 20th century has led to unprecedented growth, making it the second largest economy based on GDP.[205] This growth brought significant developmental gains but also environmental challenges. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, GHG emissions in China surged from around 4 gigatons in the early 1990s to roughly 14 gigatons by 2020, reflecting the environmental costs of rapid industrialization and welfare growth. This trajectory underscores a central tension in Chinese climate politics, namely, balancing economic development with environmental sustainability. While the political system has remained stable under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CCP), initial decisions prioritizing growth have led to environmental degradation, necessitating new policy choices involving complex trade-offs.

From the mid-2000s onward, the Chinese approach began to shift. Domestically, China established several institutional mechanisms to address climate change. The National Climate Change Expert Committee (NCCEC), formed in 2006, became a key

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[203] "What are Parties & non-Party stakeholders?," Process and meetings, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed February 2, 2025, https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-are-parties-non-party-stakeholders.; Hurri, "'Rethinking climate leadership," 7.
[204] "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," opened for signature June 4, 1992, *United Nations Treaty Collection*, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetailsIII.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XXVII-7&chapter=27&Temp=mtdsg3&clang=_en#2; "China," Parties, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed April 15, 2025, https://unfccc.int/node/180417.
[205] "World Bank Open Data," World Bank Group, accessed February 24, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org.

advisory body.[206] And in 2008, the government created the Ministry of Environmental Protection, closely linked to the State Council.[207] These developments marked the beginning of more structured climate policy, though the role of China on the international stage remained cautious. According to Jianfeng Jeffrey Qi and Peter Dauvergne, China was still widely perceived as a "spoiler," reluctant to assume a leadership position in global negotiations.[208]

In the 2010s, the position of China started to transform more visibly. Signing the Paris Agreement in 2015 was a major step in embracing a more proactive role in international climate policy.[209] Moreover, China increasingly invested in climate alliances, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, infused with a "green" development agenda.[210] In 2018, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment became operational, replacing and expanding upon the earlier Ministry of Environmental Protection, indicating further institutional consolidation and elevated climate ambitions.[211]

These developments suggest a broader political trajectory, from a relatively quiet, state-centered buildup of climate policies to an outward-facing role that integrates environmental action with national development strategies. The inclusion of a lower carbon economy goal in the 14th Five-Year Plan from 2021, as noted by the Berkeley California-China Climate Institute, indicates that climate concerns have become intertwined with the core economic and political strategies of the state.[212]

The shift of China is driven by multiple motivations, not only environmental, but also geopolitical. As Qi and Dauvergne argue, there is the desire to bolster regime

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[206] "Prof. Zhang Haibin appointed as a Member of the 4th National Climate Change Expert Committee," Institute for Global Health and Development, effective October 8, 2021, https://www.ghd.pku.edu.cn/English/News/1d37d644e3d54d3384b72752f0e6991d.htm.
[207] "History," Ministry of Ecology and Environment, The People's Republic of China, accessed April 16, 2025, https://english.mee.gov.cn/About_MEE/History/.
[208] Jianfeng Jeffrey Qi and Peter Dauvergne, "China's rising influence on climate governance: Forging a path for the global South," *Global Environmental Change* 73 (2022): 3-4, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102484.
[209] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What are Parties & non-Party stakeholders?."
[210] Qi and Dauvergne, "China's rising influence," 3-4, 9.
[211] Ministry of Ecology and Environment, "History."
[212] Anni Dai and Jessica Gordon, "Preparing for China's 15th Five-Year Climate Planning Cycle," *Berkeley California-China Climate Institute*, September 23, 2024, https://ccci.berkeley.edu/news/2024/09/preparing-china-s-15th-five-year-climate-planning-cycle.

legitimacy and capitalize on geopolitical opportunities through the climate arena.[213] Unlike the more pluralist systems of the EU or U.S., where multiple parties, advocacy groups, and civil society actors shape the climate agenda, the path of China remains highly state driven. Climate policy is embedded in centralized political planning and national development strategies. But has the shift in political stance translated into tangible results?

Initiatives such as the BRI, which incorporate green finance and infrastructure diplomacy, reflect efforts to build international climate coalitions. Yet, despite these moves, China remains one of the largest GHG emitters, and translating strategic ambition into effective outcomes remains a key challenge. As indicated by both *Figure 2* from the PBL and *Figure 3* from the CCPI, China continues to face significant gaps between targets and outcomes.[214] The pace of emission reduction remains insufficient relative to the scale of the Chinese carbon footprint and the urgency of global climate goals.

Still, this case does show that concrete measures have been taken, and international collaborations are growing. As highlighted by the University of Leiden in 2024, China and the Netherlands for example have partnered on collaborative wastewater management projects, demonstrating how climate cooperation can extend beyond high-level diplomacy to practical, technical partnerships.[215] Yet, even with such developments, a substantial implementation gap remains, and many observers stress that further acceleration of climate action is needed.

Lessons Learned

Clearly, the case of China provides lessons about political shifts in a different political context. The centralized political system of China allows for rapid mobilization around strategic goals, including climate targets. In a centralized, one-party system, a political shift does not result from electoral change or multiparty negotiation. Rather, it

[213] Qi and Dauvergne, "China's rising influence," 3-9.
[214] "CCPI 2025: Ranking and Results," Climate Change Performance Index, accessed February 20, 2025, https://ccpi.org/.
[215] Rianne Lindhout, "The Netherlands and China Work Together to Improve Their Wastewater Management," *Leiden University*, April 17, 2024, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2024/04/the-netherlands-and-china-work-together-to-improve-their-wastewater-management.

occurs through strategic agenda setting by the state, which can rapidly realign national goals, such as integrating climate priorities into economic planning. When climate change was reframed as a matter of national interest, linked to energy security, public health, and global leadership, it became embedded in key state planning documents such as the Five-Year Plans. This centralization facilitates long-term vision and alignment across ministries, which can be challenging in more pluralistic systems.

The gradual creation of specialized bodies, from the NCCEC to the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, has built the domestic capacity required to manage complex climate policy. Though less diverse than EU institutions, this structured layering within the state apparatus has allowed China to scale up its climate ambitions over time and respond more quickly to climate pressures.

The growing engagement with global climate initiatives is also shaped by its desire to project soft power and enhance international legitimacy. Initiatives like the BRI incorporate green finance, infrastructure resilience, and sustainability narratives linking domestic environmental goals with foreign policy outreach. This suggests that in the absence of democratic pluralism, climate action can be mobilized as a strategic tool for expanding global influence and regime legitimacy.

However, despite significant investments in renewable energy and the establishment of a national carbon market, China continues to face challenges in translating policy into practice. The persistence of high GHG emissions indicate systemic issues that hinder effective implementation. These challenges underscore the need for more robust mechanisms to ensure accountability and enforce compliance with climate targets.

The centralized political system of China has enabled the rapid development of climate policy and its alignment with national strategic goals. Yet this same system faces limits as high GHG emissions persist and therefore effective enforcement mechanisms remain weak. As such, China illustrates both the potential and pitfalls of a state-led climate strategy, capable of swift institutional mobilization, but constrained by the complexity of implementation in the face of rapid growth. Understanding the political and institutional context of China is thus essential to assess both its contributions to global climate policy and the structural barriers that remain.

6. Justice-Based Climate policy: The Case of South Africa

South Africa offers a case that differs from the prior ones in geopolitical weight and the ethical framing of climate governance. While the U.S., EU, and China emphasize technological capacity, economic strategy, or institutional power, South Africa introduces a justice-centered discourse, though often more in principle than in practice. Moreover, while South Africa is not among the top global emitters, it remains the largest emitter of GHG emissions on the African continent as shown by the Union of Concerned Scientists, see also *Figure 5*.[216] This duality, regionally significant yet globally modest, raises important questions about how countries outside the core of institutional climate leadership engage, contribute to, and contest dominant governance paradigms.

As a Non-Annex I country under the UNFCCC, in the 1990s, South Africa had no binding emission reduction obligations during the Kyoto Protocol era.[217] Still, it signaled early intent to engage by signing the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and ratifying it in 2005.[218] As noted, climate diplomacy was in this period heavily shaped by historical

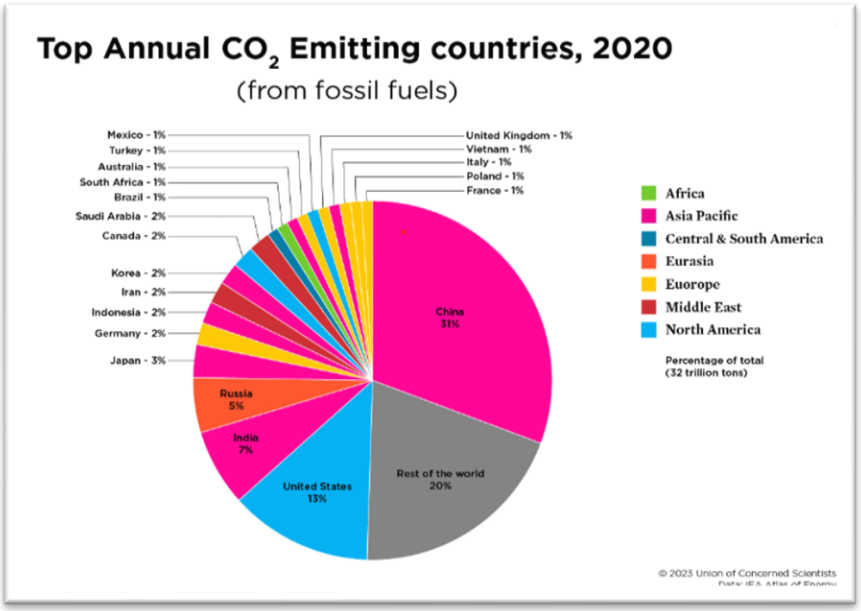

Figure 5, Union of Concerned Scientists, Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions (Union of Concerned Scientists, last updated July 12, 2023), https://www.ucs.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions.

[216] Union of Concerned Scientists, *Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions* (Union of Concerned Scientists, last updated July 12, 2023), https://www.ucs.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions.
[217] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "What are Parties & non-Party stakeholders?."
[218] "Kyoto Protocol," Programmes and Projects, Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, Republic of South Africa, accessed April 21, 2025, https://www.dmre.gov.za/energy-resources/programmes-and-projects/designated-national-authority/kyoto-protocol.

responsibility and the perceived divide between 'developed' and 'developing' nations, allowing countries like South Africa to participate while resisting imposed targets.[219]

In line with global institutional momentum, South Africa established domestic climate institutions, most notably the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), established in 2004, which advises the South African government on biodiversity and climate resilience.[220] This emergence of climate institutions was tied to broader trends of global stances towards climate change, but also created a path-dependent climate trajectory. Its role within the BASIC coalition (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), further reinforced its identity as an intermediary between developed and developing countries.[221] As noted by Gupta, by being part of this group, South Africa made voluntary reduction commitments, a reduction of 34% by 2020, and 42% by 2025, relative to business-as-usual scenarios, illustrating a strategic embrace of climate action through alignment.[222]

Domestically, the political transformation of South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994 has created a relatively stable democratic framework under the African National Congress (ANC).[223] However, climate policy in South Africa is marked by contradictions. On the one hand, it has signed and ratified major climate agreements, including Kyoto Protocol and later the Paris Agreement, signed in 2016 and ratified in 2021, aligning itself with global climate commitments.[224] On the other hand, South Africa remains deeply dependent on coal, accounting for the bulk of its energy supply and according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), in 2022, South Africa ranked as the most coal polluting country in Africa and the seventh most coal polluting country globally.[225] This contradiction, climate responsibility versus energy

[219] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 648-9.
[220] "SANBI Mandate," About Us, South African National Biodiversity Institute, accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.sanbi.org/about/sanbi-mandate/.
[221] Gupta, "A History of International Climate Change," 648-9.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Peter Limb, "Apartheid," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, edited by F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (Oxford University Press, 2010), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195334739.001.0001/acref-9780195334739-e-034.
[224] "South Africa," Parties, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed April 22, 2025, https://unfccc.int/node/61201.
[225] International Energy Agency, "South Africa: Coal."

dependency, illustrates the tensions that emerge when international leadership claims are confronted with national development priorities.

A further layer of complexity emerges when examining the foundations of climate policy in South Africa. As Dorine E. van Norren argues, post-apartheid environmental policy has predominantly mirrored liberal-democratic, market-oriented approaches, imported from the Global North.[226] These frameworks prioritize efficiency and technocratic problem-solving approaches, often set up through funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF).[227] What is less visible in institutional discourse is the potential for alternative epistemologies rooted in local ethics, most notably, the Ubuntu philosophy in South Africa.

Ubuntu, often translated as "I am because we are," is a South African philosophical tradition grounded in collective identity, interdependence, and restorative environmental justice.[228] Ubuntu informed the post-apartheid political vision of South Africa, being employed in both the 1993 interim constitution and the 1996 final constitution.[229] Yet, in climate policy, Ubuntu has remained largely absent. Instead, as argued by Van Norren, South African institutions have been shaped by external norms and donor conditionalities, particularly those imposed by the IMF and World Bank, reinforcing a top-down logic of climate policy.[230] The combination of relational ethic and the procedural rationality of liberal institutional forms creates both opportunity and friction. Without reconciliation between these paradigms, institutional design risks producing symbolic inclusion without substantive change.

Still, Ubuntu can be found in policies such as Batho Pele ("People First"), designed to align public services with community-based values.[231] As Van Norren argues, critics point out that such initiatives fail, not because of conceptual weaknesses, but due to the shallow implementation and lack of institutional support.[232] This sidelining of Ubuntu reflects broader epistemic hierarchies in global

[226] Dorine E. van Norren, "African Ubuntu and Sustainable Development Goals: seeking human mutual relations and service in development," *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 12 (2022): 2796, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2109458.
[227] "About GCF," Green Climate Fund, accessed May 2, 2025, https://www.greenclimate.fund/about.
[228] Van Norren, "African Ubuntu and Sustainable Development Goals," 2793.
[229] Ibid, 2793.
[230] Ibid, 2796.
[231] Ibid, 2795.
[232] Ibid.

climate policy, where indigenous knowledge systems are often viewed as incompatible with Western liberal frameworks rather than as sources of policy innovation.

There is, however, some movement towards re-engagement with indigenous principles. Elements of Ubuntu are echoed in the NDCs from the Paris Agreement, particularly in their emphasis on inclusion, equity, and relational well-being.[233] Yet, without explicit institutional anchoring, these engagements remain symbolic. As Van Norren emphasizes, Ubuntu could offer more than just a moral compass and could serve as foundational logic for rethinking climate policy, not through abstract future targets, but through present-day communal well-being, justice narratives, and lived interdependence.[234] The absence of Ubuntu in institutional frameworks suggests that justice-based frameworks require more than recognition. They demand structural incorporation and political prioritization.

Ubuntu also mirrors other philosophies, such as the philosophy of *Buen Vivir* in South America, which similarly provides an alternative logic on climate justice.[235] Both frameworks highlight the relational nature of environmental responsibility and challenge the current frameworks of global climate policy. Therefore, the experience of South Africa offers a story about the limitations of adopting global governance norms without recalibrating them to local contexts. This also underscores the strategic potential of symbolic leadership and the risks of marginalized narratives on climate change.

Lessons Learned

The participation of South Africa in climate agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, despite high domestic coal dependency, shows that strategic alignment with global norms can elevate the diplomatic standing of a country. This suggests that formal leadership is not always a prerequisite for influence. Symbolic

[233] Van Norren, "African Ubuntu and Sustainable Development Goals," 2798.
[234] Ibid, 2806.
[235] Birgit K. Boogaard, Dorine E. van Norren, "“Development” Perspectives from the Global South: Learning from Ubuntu and Buen Vivir Philosophies," in *The Politics of Knowledge in Inclusive Development and Innovation,* ed. David Ludwig, Birgit Boogaard, Phil Macnaghten, Cees Leeuwis (Routledge, 2021), 104-5, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003112525-9/development-perspectives-global-south-birgit-boogaard-dorine-van-norren.

participation, when coupled with coalition-building such as through the BASIC coalition can offer soft power leverage.

Another lesson to be learned is centered around cultural frameworks. Ubuntu, while central to the broader political identity of South Africa since the post-apartheid political landscape, has not translated into operational governance structures in global climate policies. This highlights a critical governance gap. Without mechanisms to embed different environmental philosophies into law effectively, budgetary processes, planning, and justice narratives remain aspirational rather than actionable. The governance system of South Africa also operates within a hybrid framework. Western liberal institutional forms coexist with indigenous cultural worldviews. While this can generate adaptive capacities and pluralistic insights, it also introduces friction. Managing these tensions requires deliberate institutional redesigning.

The final lesson to be learned from the case of South Africa is about dependency. External constraints have limited the extent to which South Africa can pursue successful justice-based approaches on its own terms. This illustrates how global institutional structures can constrain domestic climate policy and make alternative governance paradigms more difficult to achieve, even when culturally resonant and socially supported.

South Africa illustrates a form of climate policy that is both symbolically engaged and structurally constrained. Its proactive role in multilateral forums reflects a desire for recognition and alignment. Still, its domestic realities, coal dependency, and different philosophies on climate change question the extent to which it can exercise genuine leadership. The case underscores the importance of integrating culturally grounded frameworks like Ubuntu not just in political rhetoric, but in the broader institutional frameworks of climate policy.

7. Reflection: What Works?

In what ways have political shifts affected global climate policies between 1990 and 2025? While the four case studies analyzed in this project operate within very different contexts, politically, economically, and historically, certain shared dynamics and patterns emerge. Despite their different roles in global climate negotiations, each case developed national climate institutions between 1990 and 2010, signaling a collective movement toward climate action. However, the way these efforts have been shaped, disrupted, or sustained by political shifts varies significantly. The U.S. case has shown that non-state actors such as NGOs and subnational governments can sustain climate efforts during periods of federal retreat. In contrast, the experience of South Africa suggests that the efforts to operate within the current global climate framework results in tension between dominant western models and local approaches rooted in climate justice. Still, one insight emerging across cases is that domestic political commitment alone cannot explain national emission trajectories. Deindustrialization in parts of the Global North and industrial expansion in Asia have had a profound effect on climate outcomes. In the U.S. and EU, part of the emissions decline coincided with a shift in manufacturing to countries like China, where emissions surged to meet external demand. These patterns suggest that global trade dynamics must be viewed not as external to climate policy, but as deeply intertwined with it.

7.1 Patterns of Progress and Setbacks

1. Continuity Amidst Political Shifts

In the U.S., shifts in federal climate policy, from disengagement under the Bush administration, to the re-engagement under Obama, to the withdrawal of Trump from the Paris Agreement, did not lead to increased emissions. While federal leadership was inconsistent, state-level initiatives and a strong network of NGOs and regulatory institutions created a layer of continuity. Emissions stagnated, illustrating that such institutions and civil society can carry climate efforts forward even in politically shifting environments.

This insight is echoed in the EU, where countries within the multi-level governance framework of the EU have often been key in driving ambitious policies from the 1990s onward. Although political fragmentation has challenged unity at times, the embedded institutional structures of the EU, such as the Emissions Trading System (ETS), helped sustain ambition and policy continuity. Still, recent geopolitical pressures and energy insecurity have also tested the limits of institutional resilience, leading to partial delays in implementation as exemplified by the Green Deal.

2. The Local, the National, and the Global

The importance of local action is also visible in the case of South Africa. However, here the challenge lies in aligning locally grounded approaches to environmental justice within an international climate framework often shaped by wealthier nations. Alternative philosophies like Ubuntu call for attention to morality and the epistemic limits of current global policy frameworks. This suggests that locally rooted climate strategies must be integrated more meaningfully into global policy frameworks to achieve both climate justice and more effective policies.

In the U.S. too, even when national leadership regressed climate action, transnational networks and state coalitions such as the case of Boulder in Colorado with its first voter approved carbon tax showed that momentum can persist through decentralized and local coalitions.

3. Institutional Resilience vs. Volatility

A key determinant of success is the resilience of climate institutions in the face of political turnover. In the EU, institutions such as the European Commission, ETS, and long-term climate targets have proven durable for climate ambition. These structures are designed to withstand electoral volatility, allowing for long-term planning.

In contrast, the highly centralized governance model of China allows for rapid implementation of long-term goals, but it limits bottom-up input and local innovation, resulting in uneven short-term emission reductions. The South African institutions are younger, with climate policy being interwoven with different social justice epistemologies, making it more flexible, but also faces challenges of energy needs and international climate policy frameworks.

4. Justice, Trust, and Coalition-Building

Trust, legitimacy, and inclusive coalition-building emerged as vital elements across the cases. In South Africa, public legitimacy and historical accountability are essential to policy adoption. In the EU, green parties and social movements have pressured governments to act and sustain pressure on EU institutions. Rather than requiring full consensus, a coalition of progressive member states and NGOs has often driven the agenda forward, showing that pluralism can be a strength rather than a liability.
In the U.S., public trust in climate science has been undermined by decades of disinformation campaigns, which complicate consensus-building and slow political ambition. This demonstrates that technical policy alone is not enough, public belief, trust, and social movements matter deeply in effective policymaking.

Political Shift	Policy Design Response	Trade-Offs
Executive turnover or ideological swings (US, leadership transitions)	Subnational and non-state climate leadership (California, Boulder), re-entry potential under voluntary frameworks (Paris Agreement)	Enables continuity through decentralized actors, but federal volatility undermines long-term planning and weakens international credibility
Institutional fragmentation or multi-party negotiation (EU, diverse state members)	Layered governance, legal embedding of climate goals (EU Climate Law)	Consensus building enhances legitimacy but can slow implementation
Rapid economic growth in highly centralized regimes (China, state-led policy shifts)	Long-term state planning via 5-Year Plans, integration of climate into development agendas	Centralization enables scale and policy alignment but limits local adaptation and public oversight, making enforcement uneven
Postcolonial political change with alternative justice epistemologies (South Africa, Ubuntu)	Integration of indigenous frameworks such as Ubuntu	Alternative epistemologies challenge dominant frameworks, but risk marginalization without strong institutional support and integration into broader climate mechanisms

Figure 6, Table of political Shifts, Policy Design Responses, and Trade-Offs. While this table synthesizes key dynamics, the trade-offs summarized here simplify more complex institutional and political realities. For a fuller understanding of these tensions see the detailed case analyses from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6.

7.2 Strategic Recommendations from Historical Patterns

Looking across the varied experiences of the United States, the European Union, China, and South Africa between 1990 and 2025, several strategic lessons emerge for strengthening global climate policy amidst political shifts. While each context is unique, these historical patterns suggest certain conditions and approaches that consistently support meaningful climate progress.

1. Institutional Anchoring Matters

One of the clearest findings is that durable institutions provide continuity across political cycles. In both the EU and U.S., and even on an international scale, embedded frameworks, such as the Emissions Trading System in the EU, long-standing U.S. environmental organizations, and international frameworks such as the UNFCCC, helped shield climate policy from abrupt reversals. The EU goes a step further by translating long-term targets into binding legislation, as seen with the European Climate Law. This legal enforceability enhances both credibility and institutional durability, even under political strain. Building and reinforcing these structures, especially with legal or constitutional status, offers a buffer against political volatility. This is particularly important in democracies where electoral shifts can diverge from policy priorities.

Recommendation: Strengthen climate institutions at multiple governance levels, including independent oversight bodies and cross-party agreements, to ensure long-term consistency, regardless of political leadership.

2. Subnational and Non-State Actors Are Key Stabilizers

The role of cities, regions, NGOs, and civil society has proven essential when national climate leadership changed. In the U.S., local governments and environmental organizations have

maintained momentum during federal retreats. Similarly, in South Africa, community-based environmental initiatives reflect local priorities that might not always align with national or international models but remain vital for legitimacy and implementation.
Recommendation: Encourage and empower local and non-state actors to shape climate policy and implementation. This includes legal autonomy for cities, funding grassroots initiatives, and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems.

3. Adaptability to Local Realities Enhances Effectiveness

The case of South Africa highlights the challenge and necessity of aligning global frameworks with local socioeconomic realities. While international benchmarks are important, climate policy that fails to resonate locally risks resistance or inaction. Whether it is about integrating energy access into mitigation goals or accounting for historical inequalities, successful climate policy must be sensitive to the local context.
Recommendation: Promote climate policies that are flexible and inclusive, allowing countries to interpret and implement global goals in a manner that aligns with local priorities.

4. Centralization Can Deliver But Needs Accountability

The state-led model of China demonstrates that centralized political systems can implement large-scale climate projects quickly. However, these gains are often tempered by a lack of public oversight, uneven enforcement, and limited space for civil society engagement. While centralization can drive speed, it does not guarantee lasting public trust, or short-term effectiveness.
Recommendation: Combine strong central capacity with transparency, public participation, and mechanisms for bottom-up feedback to balance efficiency with accountability.

5. Justice and Trust Are Not Optional

Across all cases, the themes of justice, trust, and communication emerge as foundational. Public support for climate policy depends on trust in institutions, science, and fairness. In the U.S., disinformation campaigns weakened this trust, delaying action. In South Africa, linking climate goals with post-apartheid justice remains a central tension. Without perceived legitimacy, even technically sound policies can fail.
Recommendation: Climate strategies must prioritize equity, communication, and public engagement. This means addressing disinformation, promoting inclusive policymaking, and ensuring that climate transitions do not result in social divides.

6. Coalitions Make Climate policies Durable

Finally, the most enduring progress seems to come from broad, cross-sector coalitions, whether formal political alliances in the EU or informal partnerships among civil society. These coalitions provide the social and political capital necessary to build momentum and defend climate gains.
Recommendation: Foster coalitions that bridge government, civil society, and private sectors, recognizing that durable climate policy requires a wide base of support to survive political change.

8. Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that political shifts since 1990 have disrupted and at times strengthened global climate policies. The cases of the U.S., EU, China, and South Africa have shown that what matters is whether institutions, coalitions, and governance systems can adapt and endure. In the United States, decentralized actors provided stability amid federal reversals. In the EU, legal frameworks and broad coalitions delivered long-term continuity, though recent energy insecurity poses new risks. The central authority of China enabled rapid action, but uneven enforcement and limited public participation constrain resilience. And in South Africa, alternative climate epistemologies offer different pathways centered on justice, historical accountability, and local knowledge systems.

These cases reveal several key lessons: resilient institutions, subnational empowerment, context-sensitive frameworks, and inclusive coalitions are essential to sustaining ambition through political shifts. But they also show the fragility of progress. Decentralization can demise responsibility and result in lower climate ambition. However, political institutions are not acting in isolation. Deindustrialization and global trade patterns have significantly shaped national emissions trajectories, often in ways detached from domestic climate ambition. The reduction in emissions in parts of the Global North owes as much to offshore production as to deliberate mitigation, while countries like China have seen emissions surge under the pressure of rising global markets. As economic globalization slows and new trade dynamics emerge, climate policy will need to adapt more quickly to combat these structural forces.

The road ahead is not guaranteed. Climate policies must be actively defended, not assumed. Rising disinformation and global instability threaten progress. The challenge now is to turn fragmented progress into durable transformation. Policymakers must build institutional depth, protect space for diverse actors, and embed different justice epistemologies into climate frameworks, not as a moral afterthought, but as a condition for legitimacy and effectiveness. In a fractured and uncertain world, the question is not whether governments act, but whether societies can sustain climate ambition with durable and effective global climate policies.

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