

CHAPTER 9

Blocking Climate Action at Subnational Levels

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INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN CLIMATE POLICYMAKING

Since the Paris Climate Agreement was adopted in 2015 it has remained clear that subnational governments have an important role to play in climate policy. State/provincial and local governments are key partners in national and international policy to mitigate and adapt to climate change, particularly given their role in the energy and transportation sectors. For example, in the United States, the states' energy sector roles include permitting of fossil fuel production sites as well as regulation of electricity through public utility and public service commissions.¹ Transportation sector roles include setting vehicle emissions standards (such as California's, which are stricter than those of the federal government), jurisdiction over public transit operations and, in many cases, electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure.^{2,3,4} In addition, cities are the predominant contributors of greenhouse gas emissions and often have jurisdiction over their urban infrastructure, transportation, and land use, key avenues for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions.⁵ Scholars have also suggested that vertical and horizontal integration of climate change policy across and between levels of government is needed to adequately mitigate climate change.⁶ This is why state and local governments are important venues for climate policy decision-making. Consequently, climate policy obstruction

at the subnational level can hamstring national and international efforts, preventing signatories of the Paris Agreement from meeting their mandated targets.

Conversely, in many nations, subnational governments have filled a substantial policy void when national governments have failed to act. For example, several Mexican states developed climate action plans several years before national climate legislation appeared. Canadian provinces also pursued climate policy instruments ahead of their national government, such as the Western Climate Initiative (WCI), an emissions cap-and-trade program between California and Quebec, and Ontario's feed-in tariff program to promote greater use of renewable energy systems.⁷ In addition, between the late 1990s and the early 2020s, US climate change policy was made almost exclusively at the subnational level.^{8,9} The US federal government only recently made significant policy investments toward a renewable energy transition, and the participation of state and local governments remains necessary to maximize benefits through effective implementation. Given these considerations, understanding subnational climate policy obstruction becomes fundamental to achieving progress in the case of limited-to-nonexistent national action.

The governing context within countries can influence the ways in which climate policy obstruction manifests. For example, whether a country is federal or unitary, or some combination of the two, can shape subnational obstruction. In federal systems, power is shared among national and subnational governments, such as states and cities, while in unitary systems power is highly centralized in a national government and decisions are dictated from the top. Federal arrangements sometimes grant sovereignty or different degrees of autonomy to lower levels of government. As such, subnational governments that have considerable autonomy can in some cases bolster climate policy while undermining it in others.¹⁰ Subnational governments may collaborate with the national government on climate policy design and implementation, innovate as local climate laboratories, or contest policy vacuums at national or international levels.^{11,12} They can also obstruct climate policy through lax implementation of federal law or by blocking proactive subnational climate policy proposals.

In subnational governments with less autonomy, climate obstruction operates through complex intergovernmental relations. For example, in cases like Venezuela's and Mexico's where state-owned companies control energy policy, subnational governments that have no ownership over natural resources and energy find it difficult to develop mitigation-oriented climate policies, except via very limited instruments such as energy efficiency. Climate policy obstruction and delay can also be present when subnational legislation is superseded by national or state law, when there is legal ambiguity, or in a policy vacuum. Subnational governments in unitary systems are less equipped than national governments to develop their own climate policies.

Decisions are centralized and the subnational sphere merely implements them as directed. Subnational obstruction can take the form of delay or inaction in the implementation of climate policies. However, there have been cases when subnational governments have tried to develop their own climate policies against national interests. Confrontation or competition may arise in this context. Such is the case in China, where competition between the national carbon market and provincial markets creates uncertainty and a potential for confrontation.^{13,14}

This chapter covers subnational climate obstruction in three global regions: North America, Latin America, and Europe. We conclude by identifying the most common forms of obstruction within these regions, avenues for resisting obstruction, and calls for further research, particularly in the Global South, where fewer studies have been conducted.

SUBNATIONAL CLIMATE OBSTRUCTION IN NORTH AMERICA

In this section, we focus on the United States and Canada for two reasons. First, in addition to sharing the largest international land border in the world, the two countries have political economies more comparable with each other's than with Mexico's, with both being significantly wealthier and sharing English as an official language.¹⁵ Second, they share a history of "green bilateralism," cooperating on numerous environmental policies.¹⁶ As a recent example, the northeastern US states and eastern Canadian provinces recently created a "green grid" planning task force.¹⁷

The United States and Canada are characterized by strong federalist systems in which subnational governments (states and provinces) have a major role to play in policymaking. In the United States, climate change has been on public and governmental agendas since the 1990s; however, the US federal government has been largely unable to pass comprehensive climate mitigation policy until very recently. As such, for more than two decades, US climate change policymaking has been relegated largely to state and local governments.^{18,19,20} While state governments have passed climate legislation, there remain a considerable number with limited-to-no climate policies, and even fewer with robust and effective ones.²¹

Nationally, Canada has the advantage of being far less reliant on fossil fuels for electricity production relative to the United States. Its abundant hydroelectricity resources offer a distinct advantage in this respect. Nevertheless, similar to the United States, its provinces are characterized by very different energy economies and political interests, a situation resulting in climate policy obstruction across many of its subnational units.²² The progression of subnational climate policy in both countries has been severely limited and delayed by factors including public attitudes about climate change, party control in state

and provincial governments, and the influence of fossil fuel actors, electric utilities, and other organized interest groups.

Public Opinion on Climate Change

As discussed in detail in Chapter 7, a conservative countermovement in the United States including think tanks, politicians, media organizations, and fossil fuel interests has profoundly shaped public opinion on climate change through a campaign of misinformation.^{23,24} Since the late 1990s, party cues from political elites signaling opposition to climate policies have also driven a wedge between Republicans and Democrats on climate change.^{25,26} As such, the US public is, on average, less concerned about climate change than individuals in other countries²⁷ with Republicans being less supportive of climate policy compared with Democrats.²⁸

Partisan differences are also apparent when comparing attitudes within and across states and localities (using county-level estimates based on national and state-level data). As of 2021, 57% of Americans believed global warming was caused primarily by humans, but the estimated county-level variation on this question was considerable, ranging from 77% to 44%. When it comes to support for public policy to address climate change, significant variation also exists.²⁹ For example, on the question of whether the United States should regulate GHGs, an estimated 79% of those living in Alameda County, California support this policy compared with 53% in Loving County, Texas. Importantly, this variation in public opinion has been shown to affect policy adoption within state legislatures; states where public concern is low are significantly less likely to adopt climate mitigation policies.³⁰

Research has found that in the United States, climate denial is linked to trust in political leaders who espouse disbelief in anthropogenic climate change, but in Canada, it is related more to political ideology.³¹ This study mentions that 21% of Americans and 12% of Canadians expressed climate denial. When looking at Canadian attitudes on climate change, we generally see higher rates of belief in the existence of human-caused climate change and greater support for climate policies than in the United States.³² Despite this trend, major divides in public opinion exist at the subnational level in Canada similar to what we see in the United States. More specifically, other research reports that 87% of Nova Scotians believe climate change exists compared with 66% of residents of Saskatchewan. These findings largely reflect the heavy presence of fossil fuel interests in Saskatchewan. In addition, the authors found considerable variation in support for climate change policies, such as a carbon tax. For example, 70% of residents of Outremont, Quebec, support a carbon tax compared with only 35% of those in Fort-McMurray, a municipality in Alberta where carbon majors are more prevalent.³³

These differences in attitudes hold important implications for the likelihood of climate change policy adoption within Canadian provinces. For example, Alberta has been reluctant to pursue a renewable-energy transition due in part to lack of public support. Many Alberta residents are skeptical about anthropogenic climate change and often oppose the siting of renewable energy facilities.³⁴ Similarly, wind energy plans have frequently been shut down due to public outcry in Ontario.³⁵

Party Leadership in Subnational Governments

In the United States and Canada, a clear relationship exists between state/provincial party leadership and the adoption or obstruction of climate change policy. While US Republican governors have occasionally passed climate change legislation (e.g., former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in California), the parties have diverged over time, resulting in high elite polarization today.^{36,37} As such, when Republicans control a state's legislative body or when they hold the governor's office, they tend to block climate legislation.^{38,39,40} For example, in 2024, Republican Governor Youngkin of Virginia vetoed legislation that would have established a "green" bank in the state to facilitate the use of federal grants for renewable energy projects. This situation parallels the polarization seen in Canadian provincial governments, where Conservative leaders have adopted very limited climate policies or blocked more substantial efforts.⁴¹ For example, in early 2024, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith approved a provincial ban on renewable energy projects that would be sited on high-quality agricultural land.⁴²

In addition to blocking climate legislation, conservative party leaders have also engaged in policy retrenchment, whereby previous climate mitigation policies are reversed or weakened when party control shifts after an election.^{43,44} For example, in the United States, research has documented significant policy reversals in Ohio driven by Republican leadership in the state legislature.⁴⁵ In 2019, the state froze its Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) for two years and reduced its renewable energy target from 12.5% to 8.5% in addition to providing subsidies for fossil fuel production. In another example, the states of New Jersey and Virginia left a US regional carbon cap-and-trade program, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), soon after electing Republican governors in 2011 and 2023, respectively. After a substantial hiatus, New Jersey returned to RGGI in 2020 under a Democratic governor, Phil Murphy.⁴⁶

We see similar patterns of policy retrenchment in Canada. Though Ontario is usually governed by the Liberal Party, Conservative leader Douglas Ford was elected premier in 2018; as a result, new climate policies, such as the entrance of Ontario into the California-Quebec emissions trading system,

were canceled. In contrast with the US subnational level, in Canada parties less often determine climate policy prospects; economic interests can often be far more influential. For example, during Ford's time in office, the phasing out of coal plants and deployment of nuclear energy (projects originating from Liberal governments) continued as pillars of the province's energy transition. It is significant that those provinces with more advanced climate policies (e.g., Quebec, usually run by the Quebecois Party or the Liberals) are also less dependent on fossil fuels for electrification. Nonetheless, even Prince Edward Island (run on wind power), joined a political movement against a federal carbon tax and renewable-fuel regulations when Conservative Premier Dennis King won the majority in Parliament in 2019.⁴⁷

In addition to direct obstruction through the legislative process, Republican or Conservative Party leadership has actively spread misinformation to delay climate policy action under the guise that climate change is not or may not be human-caused. Party leaders have often obscured the benefits of renewable energy to advance fossil fuel interests. For example, in the wake of a severe energy crisis in Texas during the winter of 2021, state Republicans blamed power outages on the supposed poor performance of renewable energy, such as wind and solar, despite clear evidence that fossil fuel systems had suffered significant failures. As such, instead of grappling with concrete ways to improve the Texas electrical grid after the crisis, the state legislature introduced a series of bills that would hamstring the state's renewable energy sector.⁴⁸ Similarly, in 2021, the Alberta government initiated a "Public Inquiry into Anti-Albertan Energy Campaigns."⁴⁹ These inquiries targeted pro-climate movements, classifying them as being against Alberta's interests and parroting "nationalist" anti-climate propaganda worldwide.

The Fossil Fuel Industry

The fossil fuel industry (coal, oil, and gas and their associated supply chains) is one of the most entrenched in the US and Canadian political systems.^{50,51,52} Although the political influence of coal is on the decline relative to oil and gas (in large part because it is no longer able to compete economically with alternatives), the industry remains strong in certain US states such as Kentucky and West Virginia.⁵³ The oil and gas industries remain formidable in many states. Indeed, in terms of its financial resources, the American Petroleum Institute—a trade association representing oil and gas interests—is "by far the largest" of those that are active on issues related to climate change.⁵⁴ Oil and gas trade associations spend a disproportionate amount of their total revenues on politics.⁵⁵

These industries have tended to have an advantage over green interests in state-level policymaking, as shown in a recent qualitative examination of

state-level policy retrenchment. For example, a Texas clean energy law was never properly implemented because “after enactment, the Texas Industrial Energy Consumers (TIEC), an alliance of fossil fuel corporations and other industrial companies that rely on cheap energy, intervened aggressively to block this policy at the Public Utility Commission of Texas.”⁵⁶

Fossil fuel interests also obstruct climate policy in subnational Canada in similar ways. Alberta and Saskatchewan have entrenched, export-oriented fossil fuel industries that are both critical to the provincial economy and obstruct climate policy at national and subnational levels. For example, influenced by fossil fuel actors, the Alberta government claimed it was not responsible for meeting its own emissions targets.⁵⁷ Fossil fuel interests are so important for these so-called carbon provinces that even with the New Democratic Party in office (2015–2019) a “green agenda” and many subnational climate policies in place, exports of refined and crude oil were moved forward by the approval of the Trans Mountain Pipeline from Alberta to British Columbia.⁵⁸ Indeed, there is even evidence that these industries have influenced the public education system curriculum in Saskatchewan.⁵⁹

In the United States, there is ample evidence of subnational climate policy obstruction on the part of fossil fuel interests. Even in California—which has long been considered a leader in state-level climate policy⁶⁰—fossil fuel interests have lobbied successfully to maximize their flexibility within the state’s climate policy regime, influencing the decision for cap-and-trade to become the centerpiece of the state’s implementation of AB 32, its signature 2006 economy-wide GHG emissions-reduction law, and gaining generous treatment for themselves when it came to allowance allocation and compliance flexibility.^{61,62} As a result, the policy’s overall effectiveness has been called into question.⁶³ Meanwhile, an analysis of more than 200,000 lobbying and testimony records on bills in seventeen US states found oil and gas industry groups to be among the most likely to take positions opposite to those of environmental groups, and they tended to have success in doing so, especially in more politically conservative US states.^{64,65}

In addition, studies have compared the influence of fossil fuel actors across multiple US states to identify institutional factors (i.e., factors apart from these actors’ enormous financial resources) that can affect their influence upon policy. One study compared Texas’s and Colorado’s policy regimes around fracking (hydraulic fracturing, a type of fossil fuel extraction) to determine which state offered more environmental protections and why.⁶⁶ It found that Texas is more industry-friendly (and therefore less climate-friendly) than Colorado due to the regulatory capture of the former’s Railroad Commission (which regulates the oil and gas industries) and Texas’s greater economic dependence on the industry for revenues to support schools and other public programs. Similarly, another study, comparing Colorado and Louisiana, found that Louisiana’s lax regulation of the gas industry is due to the privileged,

central position of that industry in informal stakeholder processes that then lead to formal policies.⁶⁷

The advent of fracking in the mid-2000s, which employed new techniques for relatively inexpensive horizontal drilling for oil and gas resources, resulted in a boom in US oil and gas production that greatly enriched the fossil fuel industry. In Appalachian states such as Pennsylvania, these new technologies were applied to develop the Marcellus Shale reserves, which the industry had recently discovered. In an interview, a former Pennsylvania state energy regulator explained the political significance of this coupling:

One thing to understand about gas in Pennsylvania, it was a very small industry pre-shale [before the discovery of Marcellus Shale in particular]. It existed, but it was a very small industry. And now it's the second biggest in the United States and one of the biggest in the world. So the gas producers, the Shale Gas Association, have immense power in the Republican caucuses of the House and the Senate. Immense, immense influence. So the opposition to renewable policy comes principally from the Gas Association in Pennsylvania [whereas historically it had come principally from the coal industry].⁶⁸

Looking at all fifty states, additional research determined that the fracking boom had a statistically significant effect on the weakening of state-level climate policies.⁶⁹ Specifically, the states with more fracking potential were more likely to see a weakening of existing policies. In Canada, most fossil fuel companies are foreign-owned, or majority foreign-owned. The influence of international oil companies and global supply chains was found to be a fundamental source of obstruction of climate policies in Canada's "carbon provinces."⁷⁰

Utilities

Scholars have traditionally treated utilities as synonymous with the fossil fuel industry. They are politically powerful, typically monopolies, and, in the United States, have a particularly strong interest in state-level policies because they are regulated primarily at the state level, and have been since the early 1900s when electricity first became commercialized.^{71,72,73} Several characteristics of the utility industry, however, differentiate it from the fossil fuel industry.

First, utilities hold monopolies over designated service territories, so they do not compete with one another. Second, the profits of investor-owned utilities (IOUs), which serve three out of four US electricity customers, are not determined by how much electricity they sell but rather by how much infrastructure they build. The amount of infrastructure is determined by

what state-level regulators—public utility commissions (PUCs)—allow them to build and the rate of return they allow them to collect for their shareholders based on those capital projects. Third, despite being regulated by individual states, IOUs are typically subsidiaries of parent companies operating in multiple states that own both regulated and nonregulated subsidiaries.⁷⁴ This “multilayer subsidiary” form allows the parent company to wield outsized political influence.⁷⁵

Research has found that even if utility subsidiaries are occasionally supportive of renewable energy and/or climate policy,⁷⁶ as they can be under certain conditions in certain states, the multilayer subsidiary form has often led to greater overall emissions by their parent companies.⁷⁷ Some studies have found unequivocally that IOUs are associated with climate obstruction/denial/delay. For example, in Arizona, where IOUs are vertically integrated, they undermined the state’s net-metering policy and renewable-energy targets, and in Ohio, they were active in retrenching the RPS.^{78,79} In South Carolina, where IOUs are also vertically integrated, a solar industry lobbyist stated in an interview that Duke and Dominion, the two major IOUs in that state, “were about getting rid of rooftop solar.”⁸⁰

On the other hand, other studies have found that IOUs have more nuanced climate policy preferences, occasionally lending their political muscle in support of climate and renewable energy policies,⁸¹ particularly when they are viewed as opportunities to increase returns for their shareholders.⁸² Research has found that in California and Massachusetts IOUs were “neutral-to-positive” about economy-wide GHG-reduction legislation, with a former Massachusetts utility commissioner stating, “the utilities . . . didn’t care because they didn’t own power plants here anymore.”⁸³

Several US states, including but not limited to California and Massachusetts, adopted electric utility-sector restructuring policies in the 1990s that took IOU monopolies out of the electricity-generation business, opening that business up to competitive generation companies in hopes of reducing costs for consumers. Although the degree to which such restructuring policies have succeeded in reducing costs for ratepayers is unclear,⁸⁴ it is likely that these policies altered the IOUs’ incentives so as to make them less likely to obstruct certain types of climate policies.^{85,86}

And so, whereas oil and gas companies are unequivocally agents of state-level climate policy obstruction, the situation with electric utilities is more nuanced and will require further, state-by-state empirical research. It would appear that variations in the structure of the electric utility sector, as well as the highly unusual utility business model, are major determinants of IOUs’ climate policy preferences.⁸⁷ Interestingly, and consistent with the logic that greater competition (largely enabled or restricted by state governments) leads to greater participation of renewable-energy generators in the form of independent power producers (IPPs), one study found that states that restructured

their utility sectors in the 1990s were more likely to adopt RPS and cap-and-trade programs.⁸⁸

Canadian utilities operate slightly differently from their US counterparts. There are three forms of electric utilities in Canada. The most common are crown corporations (CC) owned by provincial governments, which oversee generation, transmission, system operation, distribution, and retail. CCs are found in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nunavut. The second form consists of private companies running the electricity sector, as in the case of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The third form is found in Alberta and Ontario, where there are hybrid formats of open wholesale markets and retail competition.⁸⁹ (For more information on obstruction in the utilities sector, see Chapter 3.)

In this diverse context, climate obstruction occurs in at least two ways in provincial Canada. The first is when provinces generate electricity with fossil fuels for domestic consumption, selling to Canadian neighbors or for export to the United States. In 2023, the federal government drafted a policy to achieve a national net-zero electricity grid by 2035. Alberta immediately refused to implement it, joining Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba.⁹⁰ The second form of obstruction ironically occurs when local communities oppose renewable projects due to their alleged environmental impacts, land use concerns, or dissatisfaction with consultation, especially for Indigenous peoples. This is the case with local opposition to wind farm projects in Ontario⁹¹ and big hydroelectricity in British Columbia.⁹²

Other Organized Interests and Think Tanks

Real estate developers, local not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) organizations, think tanks, and environmental conservation groups (occasionally) play an important role in blocking subnational renewable energy projects and other climate policy measures in the United States and Canada.^{93,94,95,96} The real estate industry particularly perceives itself to be threatened by state-level policies promoting electrification in the construction of new homes and buildings. Interest groups associated with this industry have sought state-level preemptions of municipal gas hook-up bans and have spearheaded litigation to roll back such policies.⁹⁷ A study of interest group pro-climate and anti-climate coalitions in Massachusetts, for example, found real estate groups to be a lynchpin of the typical anti-climate coalition.⁹⁸

Think tanks, in coordination with interest groups, have blocked wind projects initially approved by state and local governments, often through campaigns of misinformation about environmental harms from wind development. For example, the Caesar Rodney Institute has provided financial resources to Protect Our Coast, an interest group advocating against the siting

of an offshore wind facility in Ocean City, New Jersey.⁹⁹ Protect Our Coast has spread false claims that these wind farms pose a risk to whales. As of this writing, the group plans to file legal challenges that will delay the project and make it so costly as to prevent its construction.¹⁰⁰ Climate denial think tanks also operate in Canada, such as the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute, which hosts important conservative politicians from Alberta and other provinces and advocates against climate change mitigation policy.¹⁰¹ The institute is funded through donations from private companies and individuals, including one of its largest donors, ExxonMobil.

Other occasional sources of obstruction of renewable energy projects include local organizations and environmental groups that raise environmental concerns with siting. For example, local community and environmental groups united to prevent the Crescent Peak Wind Energy project in Nevada in 2018. These groups argued that the wind farm would be harmful to local bird and bat populations.

SUBNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY OBSTRUCTION IN LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America, Brazil and Mexico are the top greenhouse gas emitters, accounting for about 60% of the region's emissions, followed by Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, and Colombia, with 25%–30% combined.¹⁰² Despite similar presidential systems, Latin-American countries differ in their subnational government structures, divided into states, departments, municipalities, cities, provinces, and communities, among other subunits. Only Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela are federations. Although subnational political units in unitary countries normally have much less autonomy than in federal ones, some unitary nations in Latin America have granted them *more* autonomy than in federal ones.^{103,104}

Three main features define subnational climate obstruction in Latin America. First, is the way in which Latin American territories have been integrated into the global economy. Given these countries' colonial legacies, economic dynamics took the form of enclaves. These economic zones with special productive dynamics have fostered the development of local economic elites whose sectoral interests and environmental preferences have not necessarily coincided with those of national actors. Second, national trends such as weak democratic institutions, lack of accountability and transparency mechanisms, and inefficient judicial systems prone to corruption and mismanagement are magnified at the subnational level.^{105,106,107} If gray areas in politics are the rule rather than the exception in Latin America, they are magnified at the subnational level, where the rule of law is often diluted or even nonexistent.^{108,109} Third, control over environmental resources also complicates the role of subnational governments in advancing or obstructing climate issues.

On the one hand, when natural resources are centrally managed by national governments, subnational states have limited climate policymaking capacity. On the other hand, when subnational governments have greater powers over natural resources—as in the case of Argentina—there are stronger incentives for climate obstructionism due to their heavy reliance on revenues from extractive industries, despite distributive conflicts that often arise with Indigenous and local communities. These sociohistorical and structural factors have been exploited by political parties and extractive industries to intentionally deny climate change and/or block or delay climate policies.

It is also possible that public opinion may play a role in obstructing subnational climate policy in Latin America; however, a lack of public opinion data outside the national level precludes a definitive answer. Still, the repression of climate activism through violence in Latin America suggests that subnational actors are comfortable with generating fear when it serves their interests, even if it generates public outrage.^{110,111}

Party Leadership in Subnational Governments

Several Latin American countries were governed by right-wing parties and/or dictatorships in the twentieth century. In the 1990s, such countries began their transition to democracy, a process involving trial and error with party governance. Evidence shows that right-wing politics in Latin America hinders climate policy, but unlike the case of partisan polarization in the United States or the European Union (EU), even center or left-wing Latin American subnational governments have historically obstructed climate policies. Structural factors related to the international political economy and the pursuit of economic development often lead governments to adopt a discourse that advocates sustainability while sacrificing the environment for the sake of economic growth.¹¹² This is particularly relevant in the context of subnational governments, where economic dependence on natural-resource extraction and a lack of productive alternatives have meant that extractive activities are viewed as the only viable driver of development. In Brazil, for example, local political economies are highly dependent on extraction royalties (as in Rio de Janeiro and Pará) or agribusiness's economic benefits (as in Mato Grosso and Rio Grande do Sul).

When national parties delay or belittle the importance and urgency of climate action, subnational governments have followed suit, reproducing this obstruction locally. This was the case in Mexico from 2018 to 2023 under Morena, a left-wing populist party, when national energy policies favored fossil fuel extraction, oil refining, and the use of gas. Subnational governments from the same political party, such as in Ciudad del Mexico during Claudia

Sheinbaum's term, included a misleading, pro-climate discourse in their development plans, promising to adopt a cleaner energy mix despite knowing that climate policies would be inoperable within national energy-policy frameworks.

Subnational governments in Bolsonaro's Brazil provide examples of a more subtle form of climate obstruction. Despite the existence of an official climate denial strategy at the national level, some pro-Bolsonaro Amazonian states announced the development of climate action plans, especially those seeking to receive international cooperation funds, such as the UN Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+), for protection of the Amazon. Despite their calls to action, subnational governments did not follow through with their public statements; many Brazilian cities and states lacked effective local laws, adaptation plans, or emissions inventories, resulting in considerable delay in policy implementation.¹¹³

Fossil Fuel and Other Extractive Industries

Climate obstruction driven by oil and gas companies and their networks of think tanks and business associations also weakens subnational climate policies in Latin America. The oil-and-gas sector in Latin America is diverse, spanning private, state-owned domestic, and foreign companies, some of which are associated with the region's colonial background. In this arena, national climate goals are typically overshadowed by national strategic development goals.

In some Latin American countries, subnational governments have little influence over fossil fuel industry activities, as nationally owned companies such as PDVSA (Venezuela) and PEMEX (Mexico) drive energy policy. In contrast, Argentina allows its provinces input into energy policies. Though the country has a nationally owned company (YPF), the provinces of Neuquén (53%), Chubut (25%), Santa Cruz (12%), and Mendoza (10%) are its main oil producers.¹¹⁴ There, subnational dependence on oil royalties, the industry's positive impact on the labor market in these areas, and the strength of oil unions mostly favor obstruction at the subnational level through financial support to electoral campaigns and lobbying in the executive and judicial branches. For example, in Neuquén, Argentina, oil and gas royalties represent 40% of provincial incomes (as of 2022),¹¹⁵ and the oil and gas sector covers 17% of the total labor market.¹¹⁶ Guillermo Pereyra, leader of a powerful oil and gas union between 1984 and 2021, developed a prominent political career during those years, serving as provincial deputy, labor subsecretary of Neuquén, and eventually national senator. In each of these positions, Pereyra was an advocate for the oil and gas industry and blocked what he considered to be hostile climate initiatives that may harm workers.¹¹⁷

Oil production in Brazil comes mostly from deep waters near the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Apart from nationally owned PETROBRAS, international companies including Shell, BP, Statoil, Exxon, and Total are also major oil producers. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro receive royalties from the oil sector, producing regional inequality and preventing localities from developing strong climate policies.¹¹⁸ This situation also creates an interesting dynamic for cities like Maricá, which earned the highest oil royalties in 2023. Although Maricá has been governed by PT, the party of President Lula da Silva, for more than fifteen years and has adopted some climate policies, its dependence on the fossil fuel industry represents a roadblock for more effective and ambitious policies aiming to diversify energy sources and create a less oil-centric economic development model.

Climate obstruction also operates in more subtle ways in subnational Latin America. Some research has concluded that through governmental transfers, mining revenue substitutes for local taxes on mineral concessions (annual payments for the land used for mineral extraction and exploration).¹¹⁹ In other words, hosting mining within their borders makes subnational governments perceive the benefits of the revenue it generates to outweigh the environmental externalities it causes. Instead of collecting a tax, subnational governments receive a portion of the mining income. Similarly, Bolivia and Peru allocate national transfers to subnational governments to compensate them for mining activities.¹²⁰ In the Amazon region, transnational companies are permitted to exploit natural resources through, in some cases, questionable licenses to explore Indigenous lands,¹²¹ in exchange for providing jobs and investments in the area as well as income through royalty payments, thereby guaranteeing themselves a level of influence in local politics. This influence allows them to obstruct any effort to adopt climate actions because they are perceived as necessary to the local economy.¹²² In Argentina, such a scenario is twofold: while some provinces have passed laws that limit metal mining, others have made mining policy the backbone of their economic policy. The cases of Catamarca and San Juan, illustrate how coordination between state and corporate interests can obstruct environmental initiatives. State and corporate interests in these provinces collaborate against policies that may restrict mining or that would allow direct democracy mechanisms to be used to make decisions about natural resources.¹²³

Subnational governments in Latin America exhibit other forms of climate policy gridlock stemming from hybrid forms of governance and local political economies that are highly dependent on mining royalties. Informal mining activities, which operate in a legal gray area, are common, and contribute to large deforestation and GHG emissions rates. “Artisanal” mining (extracting no more than 25 metric tons of minerals per day) is legal in Peru for economic survival. In the Peruvian departments of Madre de Dios, Sur Medio, and Puno,

this practice is common, with communities working in mines already exploited by big companies. If artisanal mining groups do not start a formalization process, however, they could be considered illegal.¹²⁴ Under this hybrid-policy scenario, developing climate strategies can be difficult to implement and enforce.

Other Organized Interests

Subnational governments in Latin America sometimes support other business actors that obstruct climate policies, such as the forestry industry. In the Brazilian context, the presence of agribusiness is crucial for understanding how climate obstruction operates in the country, as a significant portion of GHG emissions there stem from land use. A notable segment of the political right is closely aligned with this industry, complicating the adoption of bold climate action. At the local level, these actors wield significant influence, particularly in the southern and central-western region of the country that hosts a substantial portion of grain and beef production, thus influencing climate legislation at the subnational level.

Deforestation in the region occurs mostly in the Amazon and the Petén forests, where soy, palm oil, cotton, corn, and/or lumber are profitable commodities.¹²⁵ Their production directly influences subnational political dynamics (funding parties, electing friendly politicians, having family members in the judicial branch) where private actors often overpower the national and subnational governments. When stronger environmental laws are established in government-managed land in the Amazon or Petén, agricultural production tends to migrate to other areas, which are then privatized. Private companies then exert substantial influence over subnational governments. For example, the Brazilian region of Cerrado in ten states of the country's center-west, once an important CO₂ sink, is now the powerhouse of the soy industry in Latin America.¹²⁶ The result has been surging emissions.

EUROPEAN CLIMATE POLICY OBSTRUCTION

European climate policy obstruction at the subnational level is generally more limited than it is in the United States for two reasons: first, there is a broader consensus among political leaders and the public about the scale of the climate change problem and the range of measures needed to combat it. Europeans overwhelmingly consider climate change a serious problem, ranking it as the third most pressing global issue. According to surveys conducted by the European Union and Eurobarometer, a vast majority (93%) view climate change as

a serious issue, with 77% considering it very serious. In general, public opinion strongly supports climate action, with 88% of respondents, including at least 70% in each of the twenty-seven Member States, endorsing minimizing GHG emissions and achieving a carbon-neutral EU economy by 2050.¹²⁷ Second, European climate change policy is heavily influenced by the mitigation efforts of the EU, which include ambitious targets and regulatory measures that encompass various sectors including energy, transportation, and agriculture.^{128,129}

Despite the top-down approach to climate policy in the region, European climate governance is polycentric, with subnational governments in some countries playing a substantial role in policy adoption and implementation.¹³⁰ As such, obstruction can occur when regional, provincial, or local governments' policies or ideologies do not align with the overarching goals set by the European Union.¹³¹ Despite aggressive supranational targets, such as becoming carbon-neutral by 2050, and the introduction of key initiatives such as the European Green Deal,¹³² climate policies can become polarized at different levels of government, with political parties obstructing initiatives to, for example, differentiate themselves or to appease a base that may be skeptical of climate change.^{133,134}

Misinformation campaigns and public skepticism about climate science have also led to resistance against necessary climate actions at the subnational level in Europe, although so far this has been to a lesser extent than in North America.¹³⁵ For example, in Scotland, misinformation campaigns on the benefits of fracking were targeted at both the regional parliament and the public, though this did not result in a change to the ban on fracking.¹³⁶ Furthermore, a lack of coordination between government levels can lead to ineffective or delayed policy actions by party actors.¹³⁷ Finally, fossil fuel interests play an important role in some European regions, where substantial parts of the economy are driven by fossil fuel production or processing, resulting in the delay of EU policy implementation and a lack of independent action by subnational governments.^{138,139}

Party Leadership in Subnational Governments

Whether subnational units obstruct climate policy depends partly on political party leadership and the institutional context. When the same party controls the subnational and national government, we see less obstruction. Similarly, there is less obstruction in unitary states. For example, Belgium has a dual system of federalism whereby both the federal government and subnational units have considerable autonomy. At times, this arrangement has resulted in lax environmental policy implementation as parties shift blame to other levels

of government when climate targets are not met.¹⁴⁰ One could think of this as a form of climate obstruction, as it takes advantage of the institutional setting to delay compliance with climate goals.

In another example, subnational regions in the United Kingdom have differed dramatically in how they implemented GHG-reduction standards imposed by the UK Parliament, as well as in their adoption of independent climate change measures, based partly on party politics. In Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party, a conservative party primarily representing Protestants, blocked a climate change act in the Northern Ireland Assembly for a decade, in part because it held the Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs Ministry for much of that time in Northern Ireland's complicated power-sharing arrangement.¹⁴¹ Its Climate Change Act was eventually passed in 2022, containing concrete emissions targets for 2030, 2040, and 2050.¹⁴² In contrast, Scotland had passed a similar policy in 2009 and Wales in 2016.¹⁴³

Party leadership can also blunt public and economic resistance to climate action, preventing obstruction despite pushback from some members of the public and business interests. For example, from 2021 to 2023, in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, one of the country's most industrialized regions, there were major protests in favor of transitioning from traditional coal and steel industries to less polluting alternatives. This shift is affecting local economies and employment in cities like Essen and Dortmund, which have historically depended on these sectors. The state government, composed of a Christian Democratic Union–Green coalition broadly supportive of Germany's overall climate change plan, chose to promote investments in renewable energy and infrastructure modernization, aiming to position the region as a leader in green technology. The Alternative for Germany Party, which has opposed Germany's and the European Union's climate policies, campaigned on a heavily pro-coal platform, but won only twelve seats in the regional legislature (out of 195), leaving them unable to engage in any meaningful obstruction.¹⁴⁴

Italy's Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige regions also face economic diversification challenges from climate action, as they have strong presences in the manufacturing and agriculture sectors. In 2023, local movements and resistance, especially in agricultural subsectors such as wine production, led to increasing pressure on the regional governments to reject some EU directives on climate change.¹⁴⁵ However, both regions were under the control of the Lega party which, while radical-right in orientation, has as of this writing not engaged in climate obstruction, did not respond to the public and sectoral pressure, and continued to comply with the directives.¹⁴⁶

These examples illustrate the complex interplay of economic, social, and institutional factors as the nations and subnational units of Europe implement EU policies. While some regions are well-positioned to capitalize on the shift toward a fossil fuel-free economy, others face significant challenges that could

exacerbate existing disparities and lead to social unrest. Still, this social unrest has yet to translate into obstruction within most subnational governments, due in part to continued support among many party leaders for climate action. The success of Europe's Green Deal will depend largely on addressing economic disparities and ensuring a just transition for all communities.¹⁴⁷

Fossil Fuel Lobbies in the European Union

Climate obstruction involves a complex network of actors who work actively to impede climate action. These players include influential policymakers in addition to lobbyists, primarily from the fossil fuel sector and automobile industries.¹⁴⁸ The influence of these actors can manifest in the form of weakened environmental regulations, subsidies for fossil fuels, and limited support for renewable energy initiatives. By aligning their interests with those of powerful industries, policymakers contribute to climate obstruction and hinder the transition to a low-carbon economy.¹⁴⁹

For example, the resistance to climate policies in countries such as Poland and Germany often reflects deeper socioeconomic and cultural concerns affecting local populations. In Poland, coal mining is not just an industry; it's a significant part of the national identity, especially in regions such as Silesia.¹⁵⁰ Coal mines are a major employer, and the industry supports many ancillary businesses. The phase-out of coal therefore threatens to destabilize local economies that depend heavily on mining jobs. Poland's coal-mining sector also enjoys strong political backing, particularly from the Law and Justice party, which garners substantial support in mining regions. Proposals to reduce reliance on coal have been met with resistance from trade unions and local communities that fear job losses and economic decline.¹⁵¹ However, as Poland is a unitary state, support for coal has surfaced mostly at the national rather than subnational level.

Germany's federal structure means that individual states (such as *Länder*) have significant autonomy over their energy policies. While federal climate policy is fairly robust in Germany, states such as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg have been slow to embrace renewable-energy targets, due partly to political leadership that prioritizes fossil fuel-dependent economic interests. Fossil fuel companies and car manufacturers have used Germany's multilevel form of governance to block or slow climate policy, as in the city-state of Hamburg, which produces nearly half of Germany's GHG emissions and opened a new coal-fired power plant in 2015.¹⁵² In regions such as Bavaria, there is significant local opposition to wind turbines, which residents argue would spoil the area's natural and cultural landscape. This opposition is often supported by local

politicians who seek to maintain their electoral base by aligning with public and industry sentiment.¹⁵³

CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates the pervasiveness of climate obstruction at the subnational level in North America, Latin America, and Europe. Ultimately, climate federalism is a double-edged sword,¹⁵⁴ whereby subnational power provides opportunities for both proponents and opponents of climate policy to advance their goals. While obstruction occurs in all three regions reviewed here, the level and particular forms obstruction takes vary across these global regions. In North America, public opinion—frequently manipulated by political elites supported by fossil fuel actors—is a major factor in subnational climate policy delay. In addition, electric utilities play an outsized role in subnational politics in the United States. In Latin America, the primary source of obstruction comes from extractive firms and agribusiness, who take advantage of the institutional setting to block or delay climate change policy. In Europe, obstruction appears most prevalent at national and supranational levels; however, when subnational obstruction does occur, it commonly takes the form of delayed implementation by political party leadership, often in response to local or regional economic interests. In all three regions discussed here, the distributive politics that creates economic winners and losers across labor and capital can delay climate action.^{155,156} Yet in Europe and North America, this type of politics is visible on the surface, seen in protests and overt political actions characteristic of advanced democracies, whereas in Latin America politics tends to be buried under more fundamental governance challenges such as political corruption, hybrid forms of government, and fragile democratic institutions.

The varying forms of obstruction just described lend themselves to different solutions, depending on the context. For instance, in the United States the role of political elites and party polarization largely necessitates a focus on electing and elevating progressive leaders into key subnational government roles. Moreover, climate policy options should be framed to broaden public support, such as discussing the cobenefits of climate policies alongside public health and reducing income inequality.^{157,158} When it comes to the US electric utility industry, efforts can be made to restructure the industry to break up vertically integrated utility monopolies.¹⁵⁹ In addition, some have suggested the possible benefits of nationalizing the grid,¹⁶⁰ despite the opposition such a move could ignite. In the Latin American context, it is important to have multistakeholder collaboration that brings economic, community, and environmental interests to the table. Moreover, including clear enforcement mechanisms in climate laws may prevent private interests from delaying their implementation. In Europe, a recent proposal to address the influence of the fossil fuel

lobby may help prevent obstruction. The proposal includes a ban on oil and gas lobbying in the name of public health; a similar ban exists for the tobacco industry.¹⁶¹

These findings provide important insight into subnational obstruction within a range of global contexts, yet we still have much to learn, especially in the Global South. Analysis of climate obstruction has focused primarily on developed countries, and there is a paucity of published scholarship on subnational levels of government and climate obstruction in developing countries (see Chapter 8). Education and language gaps and the lack of reliable data—or at least, public access to it—have prevented the development of any literature in many regions. In parts of Latin America as well as in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, data gathering (where it is possible) can be extremely dangerous, and publishing results even more so. Weak federalism, unstable governance, and political violence often preclude the systematic study of this topic in many parts of the world. As such, our overarching findings on global subnational obstruction should be taken as preliminary. Despite the challenges of studying the Global South, climate policy scholars have laid out a clear agenda for such research, which may begin with interviewing key stakeholders in the region.¹⁶² While data challenges abound, qualitative research is a good starting point for identifying the unique characteristics of obstruction in the Global South.

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