Exceptional Circumstances Does Climate Change Trump Democracy?

Article *in* Issues in science and technology · December 2016

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Exceptional Circumstances

Does Climate Change Trump Democracy?

Researchers who flirt with the idea that more authoritarian governance would help us address global warming are badly mistaken. What's really needed is more democracy.

The threats to democracy in the modern era are many. Not least is the risk posed by the widespread feeling among different segments of the public in contemporary democracies that no one from the political class is listening. Such discontent reaches from the Tea Party in the United States and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom to the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party in Germany and the National Front in France. But worryingly, similar sentiments can be found in the scientific community.

The robustness of the consensus in the science community about human-caused climate change has in recent years not only increased in strength, but a number of current studies point to far more dramatic and long-lasting consequences of global warming than previously thought. Moreover, it is highly likely that the sophistication and depth of our knowledge about global and regional climates will substantially increase in the next couple of decades. Under such circumstances, how is it possible, many scientists ask, that such evidence does not motivate political action and behavior change in all societies around the world? Why are we waiting?

Sophie Guerrive for Captain Future, *Camping Sauvage*, 2015.

La Gaîté Lyrique, a modern art and music center in Paris, offered programs exploring climate and ecological issues during COP21 that were suitable for all ages. Captain Future, its program for children, explored themes of camping and nature through concerts, lectures, screenings, and workshops. La Gaîté Lyrique served as the headquarters for ArtCOP21.

ARTCOP21

The well-known climate researcher James Hansen, who has been publicly sounding the alarm on global warming since his influential 1988 testimony before the U.S. Congress, summarized the general frustration when he asserted in 2007 that "the democratic process does not work." In his 2009 book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, James Lovelock, another long-time scientific voice of warning, compares climate change to war, emphasizing that we need to abandon democracy to meet the challenges of climate change head on. To pull the world out of its state of lethargy, "nothing but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" is urgently needed.

Dale Jamieson, professor of environmental studies, philosophy, and law at New York University and author of *Reason in a Dark Time* (2014), exemplifies such a skeptical view about the obstacles faced by our present political order in coping with the consequences of global warming. He warns that climate change presents us "with the largest collective action problem that humanity has ever faced, [but] evolution did not design us to deal with

such problems, and we have not designed political institutions that are conducive to solving them." He adds: "Sadly, it is not entirely clear that democracy is up to the challenge of climate change."

I do not disagree with Jamieson about the enormous challenge global warming likely offers. But I do disagree strongly about the implicit medicine, the rationale for which is beginning to come from scholars in diverse fields. The historian Eric Hobsbawm's long-time skepticism toward democracy extends in his 2008 book, *Globalisation, Democracy, and Terrorism*, to strong doubts about the effectiveness of democratic states in solving complex global problems such as global warming. And Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman says: "the bottom line is that I'm extremely skeptical that we can cope with climate change. To mobilize people, this has to become an emotional issue. It has to have immediacy and salience. A distant, abstract, and disputed threat just doesn't have the necessary characteristics for seriously mobilizing public opinion."

Al Gore's famous "inconvenient truth" begins now to imply the complements of an "inconvenient democracy" due to an "inconvenient mind," that is, the cognitive inability of ordinary citizens to incorporate longer-term transformation demanded by climate change into their thinking and decision making, and "inconvenient social institutions" that systematically ignore the future.

Climate scientists, social scientists concerned with climate change, and the media refer to a future of "exceptional circumstances." However, the same groups also assert that no one is listening to their diagnosis of potential incomparable dangers. An elite of climate scientists believes they are reading the evidence that others fail to acknowledge and know truths that others lack the courage to fully confront. In light of the extraordinary dangers to human civilization posed by climate change, democracy quickly becomes in their eyes an inconvenient form of governing.

Although the context is new, there is nothing new, as Cambridge University political scientist David Runciman has documented, "about this outburst of disgust with the workings of democracy. Nor is it distinctly American. Europeans (with the possible exception of [contemporary] Germans) are just as disenchanted with their elected politicians. Lamenting the failings of democracy is a permanent feature of democratic life, one that persists through governmental crises and successes alike." Surprisingly, however, scientists' disenchantment with democracy and the implication that political liberties might need to be suppressed in light of profound future environmental changes has not received much systematic attention in social science, politics, or the media.

I will bring this disenchantment into the spotlight. I will insist that there is no contradiction between democratic governance and scientific knowledge. Rather than lamenting the inconvenience of democratic governance, the need is to enhance democracy, not despite, but especially in light of, the massive challenges of a changing climate. We need to recognize our changing climate as an issue of political governance and not as an environmental or economic issue.

The rise of exceptional circumstances

In the past, warlike conditions and major disasters typically were seen to justify the abolition of democratic liberties, if only temporarily. The term "exceptional circumstances" refers to conditions often invoked to grant governments additional powers to avert or tackle unforeseen but threatening political, economic, or environmental problems. The present appeal to exceptional circumstances echoes this sentiment, demanding the elevation of a single socio-political purpose—carbon emissions reductions—to ultimate political supremacy.

We are confronted with an entirely novel situation: Anthropogenic climate change is locked in. Most of the scientific discourse has been devoted to establishing the phenomenon. That issue has been settled. What is not settled in science is a range of important questions such as the speed of warming or the nature of the consequences of climate change on various significant attributes of human existence or, perhaps most importantly, what actually must be done, and how it can be done.

Except for reference to singular historical events such as war, there are no large-scale human experiences, or models of success, to which the claims of the climate science community can appeal as a precedent for the course it is considering. Governing the consequences of climate change refers to a time scale and to societal transformations that are clearly beyond the ability of human imagination and current political institutions to cope with.

Thus do Lovelock, Hobsbawm, and others appeal to extraordinary circumstances or a warlike footing that necessitates the suspension of freedoms and the political ascent of climate scientists. A growing chorus of critical voices within the scientific community, advocacy world, and the media seems certain that democratic societies are unable to

Rachel Whiteread, *Embankment*, 2005.

Rachel Whiteread's *Embankment* installation was a labyrinth-like structure exhibited at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2005. The work was made from 14,000 casts of the insides of boxes, stacked to occupy the monumental space. Photographs of the installation toured with Cape Farewell's Art & Climate Change exhibition from 2006 to 2010. Photograph by Sjoerd ten Kate.

ARTCOP21

effectively and speedily attack global environmental problems. The American political theorist and historian Timothy Mitchell, who has written some exceptional empirically based reflections on what he calls "carbon democracy," is equally pessimistic when he states, "faced with the threats of oil depletion and catastrophic climate change, the democratic machineries that emerged to govern the age of carbon energy seem to be unable to address the processes that may end it."

And the alternative? We are left with the central state, guided by scientists, as the source of security in the face of radical risk. Only an appeal to extraordinary circumstances—that is, to a threat to the very existence of humankind—"might be able to give capacity and . . . energy back to a failing or hampered [political] will," the French political scientist Pierre Rosanvallon argues.

But how does one govern well under exceptional circumstances? Doing so is allied to two assertions: that an "inconvenient mind" justifies imposing one's (superior) ideas on citizens and that "inconvenient social institutions" justify a strong state in the form of a command society.

Here one may note how history repeats itself. In the 1970s, a similar kind of skepticism arose around the question of limits to growth and the survival of humankind. Scientists warned about the essential slowness and inflexibility of democratic institutions and expressed their preference for authoritarian solutions. Dennis Meadows, the co-author of the original *Limits to Growth*, reiterated some 40 years later his strong suspicion about the barrier to needed action and solutions in the face of growing environmental threats to our civilization by virtue of the "slowness" and "short-sightedness of governance."

The implication of the position is that democratic governance of society must be subordinated to the defeat of the exceptional circumstances. The single purpose of defeating the exceptional circumstances legitimizes the suspension of political rights and liberties. But for how long can one defer liberties? At least in the case of war, in democratic societies the answer is that, in economist Friedrich Hayek's words, "it is sensible temporarily to sacrifice freedom in order to make it more secure in the future." However, is any massive absorption of powers in the hand of the state and its representatives easily reversible? And, are the potential consequences of climate change the equivalent of (abrupt) warlike conditions? How can one pinpoint the onset of exceptional circumstances? Or, perhaps even more troubling, their endpoint?

The deficiencies of, and the short-term as well as long-term challenges faced by, democratic governments are many and go far beyond the problem of climate change and its societal consequences. What alternatives do these impatient scholars have in mind? After all, authoritarian and totalitarian governments do not have a record of environmental accomplishments; nations that have followed the path of "authoritarian modernization" such as China and Russia cannot claim to have a better record, despite the high status of scientists and engineers in their societies. Nonetheless, the disenchantment with democracies continues to be advanced, perhaps becoming even more vocal as entrenched climate policy regimes such as the United Nations Framework Convention fail to live up to their promise and as one after another international conference on climate change fails to achieve the goals of a substantial global reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

The erosion of democracy

The argument about upcoming exceptional circumstances due to climate change and the concomitant implication of an inconvenient democracy derives its intellectual sustenance from a range of considerations: a deep-seated pessimism about the psychological make-up of human beings; the specific temporality—that is, short-term perspective—of human thought; the failure to mobilize populations to support the

cause of effective climate policies; the inability of government, given constitutional constraints, to attend to long-term goals; the fragility of political order, which depends for survival on mobilizing consensus around incremental change; the influence of vested interests on the political agendas of the day; the widespread social addiction to fossil fuel; and last but not least, the climate science community's sense that its message of evidence and rationality is not stimulating action.

The mass of citizens, it seems, simply cannot be won over to endorse and follow the course of policy options that scientists support. The large majority of citizens are basically inclined to act irrationally; people just do not appear to be able to comprehend what is good for them. As the German climate scientist Hans Joachim Schellnhuber complains, "… my own experience and everyday knowledge illustrate that comfort and ignorance are the biggest flaws of human character. This is a potentially deadly mix." Here Schellnhuber rehabilitates a sentiment from Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" in which Kant notes: "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long freed them from external guidance, gladly remain immature all their lives."

Not just citizens, but their democratically elected politicians, seem unlikely to implement satisfactory policy: activist climate scientists, journalists, and many other observers agree that the recent climate summits in Copenhagen, Cancun, Durban, and Warsaw (and perhaps now Paris) were failures. The summits did not result in a new global agreement to cope with the emissions of greenhouse gases. Existing agreements seem to have no impact.

The typical short-term temporal perspectives in democracy apparently justify doubts about the effectiveness of democratic governance in the face of future risks and dangers of climate change. Problems of timeliness are central to the conditions of democratic governance. On the one hand, democratic governance is captivated by the immediacy of frequently changing "events," such as economic crises or terrorist attacks, which attract the attention of voters and the media. On the other hand, it is constrained by constitutional rules of representation, like election and budget cycles, that prescribe relatively short time horizons for action. David Runciman in *The Confidence Trap*, his 2013 study of the history of democracy in crisis since World War I, sums up these often-noted deficiencies of democratic governance by observing that democracies "prioritize immediate over future experiences, simplicity over complexity, gut instinct over science."

The discussion in the climate science and policy community about the shortcomings of democratic governance resonates, at least superficially, with assessments coming from the social sciences of the present and future state of democracy, which have reached similar discouraging conclusions about the efficacy of democratic governance in many nations. So, for example, political scientist and former UK Member of Parliament David Marquand sees "a hollowing out of citizenship; the marketization of the public sector; the soul-destroying targets and audits that go with it; the denigration of professionalism and the professional ethic; and the erosion of public trust." Many social science observers see contemporary democracy—whether by design of self-interested actors such as large corporations, or as an unintended outcome of structural economic, political, and moral changes—as tending toward increasingly autocratic forms of governance.

But social scientists and climate scientists diverge profoundly in their analyses of the necessary remedy. Social scientists such as political historian Rosanvallon and sociologist Colin Crouch see the need to restore the vitality of the core function of democracy through more active participation of large numbers of citizens in shaping the agenda of public life. Climate scientists and others whose chief concern is climate change seem instead to believe democratic governance to be inherently incapable of coping effectively with large-scale environmental problems. From this perspective, the very abolition of democracy would be a virtue and the establishment, for example, of "benevolent despotism" would be desirable. In some of the images of "post-democracy," a return to aristocratic society has already been achieved: self-appointed elites claim to carry out the wishes of the masses. A direct, unequivocal commitment to authoritarian rule can rarely be found in scholarly communication. But the implicit message is clear when Dale Jamison, for example, suggests that it is difficult to see "how to get populist democracies to accept constraints on the popular will that might help make climate stability possible."

To those who see climate change as a uniquely overwhelming threat to human well-being, democracy itself seems inappropriate, its slow procedures for implementation and management of specific, policy-relevant scientific knowledge leading to massive risks and dangers. The democratic system designed to balance divergent interests has failed in the face of these threats.

Enlightened leadership?

Until recently, open and explicit expression of doubt about the virtues of democracy has been rare among intellectuals and politicians, with the obvious exception of certain leaders of decidedly undemocratic nations. In particular, scientists rarely have raised serious misgivings in public about democracy as a political system, most surely not in post-war Germany.

But times are changing. The irritation with democracy and the shifting understanding of the role of scientists goes hand-in-hand with a change in the function of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Increasingly, the IPCC behaves not like a scientific organization with the mandate to offer alternative policy options for political discussion and decision, but as a body prescribing actions that are essentially political in nature, such as limiting warming to no more than two degrees Celsius, as if such actions follow directly and unambiguously from the science.

Leading climate scientists insist that humanity is at a crossroads. A continuation of present economic and political trends could lead to disaster, if not a collapse of human civilization. To create a globally sustainable way of life, we immediately need, in the words of Schellnhuber, a "great transformation." What that statement exactly means is vague. Part, if not the core, of the required great transformation is a new political regime. Hansen, Mitchell, and Lovelock seem, in quotations I cited earlier, to be voicing similar sentiments.

Science, knowledge, and democracy

What should be the role of climate science knowledge and climate scientists in political deliberations about climate policy? Can science, and thus should scientists, tell us what to do? For the Massachusetts Institute of Technology historian and philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller, the answer is clear: "where the results of scientific research have a direct impact on the society in which they live, it becomes effectively impossible for scientists to separate their scientific analysis from the likely consequences of that analysis." To Keller, this seems to then add up to a compelling case for an immediately effective, practical political role of climate science, given the seriousness of the problem of global warming:

> There is no escaping our dependence on experts; we have no choice but to call on those (in this case, our climate scientists) who have the necessary expertise.… Furthermore, for the particular task of getting beyond our current impasse, I also suggest that climate scientists may be the only ones in a position to take the lead…. [G]iven the tacit contract between scientists and the state which supports them… I will also argue that climate scientists are not only in a position to take the lead, but also that they are obliged to do so.

The idea that science and scientific leadership offer some sort of alternative to democracy has, to put it mildly, major weaknesses.

Complementing the expectation that scientists must lead is the conviction that citizens are unprepared to act. We have already seen how some leading academics believe that the public is not cognitively capable of coming to the right conclusions about climate change's urgency. Robert Stavins, director of Harvard's Environmental Economics Program and an IPCC lead author, notes that a "bottom-up demand, which normally we always want to have and rely on in a representative democracy, is in my view unlikely to work in the case of climate change policy as it has for other environmental problems.... It's going to take enlightened leadership, leaders that take the lead."

But the idea that science and scientific leadership offer some sort of alternative to democracy has, to put it mildly, major weaknesses. To begin with, scientific knowledge does not and cannot dictate what to do. One of the fundamental flaws in the portrait of an inconvenient democracy is the failure to recognize that knowledge of nature must always enter society through politics (whether democratic or authoritarian)—through decisions about, as Harold Laswell famously put it, "who gets what, when, how." Knowledge about how such decisions are best made is not particularly available to scientists. Indeed, such knowledge is inherently and necessarily contestable.

The vision of a scientifically rational and beneficent authoritarian regime is thus incoherent because it treats a simple technical goal—the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions—as if the very fact of its articulation should automatically illuminate an optimal pathway for transforming the complex global energy system on which modern societies depend for their survival. But as stressed by Mike Hulme, a climate scientist who has come down clearly on the side of democracy, such notions may be favored by those "who are more likely to conceive of the planet as a machine amendable to control engineering."

The pessimistic assessment of the ability of democratic governance to cope with and control exceptional circumstances seems to bring with it an optimistic assessment of the potential of large-scale social planning. Yet all evidence suggests that the

capacity not only of governments, but societies, to plan their future is rather limited, perhaps non-existent. The problem is not one of democracy, but of the complexity of social change. From this perspective, the claims that the key uncertainties about the behavior of the natural climate processes have been eliminated does nothing whatsoever to address the uncertainties associated with the social and political processes for taking effective action. Consensus on the evidence of natural science, it is argued, should motivate a consensus on political action. The uncertainties of social, political, and economic events, the difficulty of anticipating the future, are treated as minor obstacles that can be managed by the experts. But contemporary societies show no evidence that these uncertainties are even comprehensible, let alone manageable.

Indeed, this is precisely why democracy, inconvenient as it may be, is not only necessary but, for a challenge of the magnitude and complexity of climate change, essential. To a far greater extent than authoritarian governance, democratic governance is flexible and capable of learning from policy mistakes, which are inevitable when trying to deal with something as complex as climate change. Democratic governments' ability to learn allows them, as Runciman explains in *The Confidence Trap*, "to keep experimenting and adapting to the challenge they encounter, so that no danger becomes overwhelming." Democracies "have the experimental adaptability and they have the collective resilience under duress." But Runciman offers a cautionary note, because "the knowledge that democracies have of their long-term strengths does not tell them how to access those strengths at the right moment. That is why climate change is so dangerous for democracies." Dangerous because the impatience of the climate science community leads it to imagine that other, less open forms of governance might do better than democracy.

Ackroyd & Harvey, visualization of *Radical Action Reaction*, 2015.

Ackroyd & Harvey's *Radical Action Reaction* was on view December 3–7, 2015, in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris. A majestic tree framed by drapes made of live grass, this installation inaugurated the UN climate talks in Paris and celebrated the role of trees in enabling cities to adapt to and mitigate climate change.

Enhancing democracy

What is good governance? And what is good governance under exceptional circumstances? Is good governance democratic governance?

The impatient scientists' disenchantment with democracy risks placing excessive power in the hands of states, transnational organizations, and multinational corporations. Participatory strategies are only rarely in evidence. Likewise, global mitigation has precedence over local adaptation. Global knowledge triumphs over local knowledge. However, societal trends appear to be moving in the opposite direction. The ability of large institutions, powerful as they may be, to impose their will on citizens is declining. People are mobilizing around local concerns and efforts, including responses to climate change. Opportunities for enhanced democratic governance are even now being created.

The reigning discussion of options for future climate policies seems grounded on the idea that after 25 years of failed international climate policy effort, the same failed climate policy regime must remain in place and is the only correct approach. The problem is not the proposed and still imaginary governance regime, but the actual politics that prevent its realization. It follows that international negotiations must lead to a new agreement for concrete, but much deeper emission-reduction targets. Only a super-Kyoto can help us. But how the noble goals of comprehensive emission reduction can be practically and politically enforced at the international level remains in the fog of general declarations of intent. The more the international negotiations fail to lead to meaningful global emissions reductions, the more skeptical scientists seem to become of democratic governance at the national level.

A strong repudiation and falsification of the current line of attack for climate policy occurred during the recent global recession, which contributed to an unintended and unprecedented reduction in the growth rate of carbon dioxide

emissions. The worldwide reaction to the economic crisis, most recently during the November 2014 G20 meeting in Australia, however, shows very clearly that no government conceives of a reduction in the growth of the wealth of its population as a useful mechanism to achieve a reduction in emissions. On the contrary, all efforts worldwide aim at a resumption of economic growth. Apparently not a single nation believes that the political and social consequences of economic decline are worth trading for emissions reductions.

Proponents of the inconvenient democracy perspective draw the wrong conclusion from these developments, namely that only authoritarian political states, preferably guided by scientists, would be able to make effective and correct decisions on the climate issue. No evidence supports this view. Certainly today's China cannot serve as a model. On the contrary, the authoritarian Chinese government that has delivered enormous growth of both wealth and carbon emissions is also delivering an ever more educated and affluent population that, in turn, will demand participation in political decision making, including environmental policies.

An alternative model is therefore needed, and I submit that it will be found only through revitalized democratic interaction in which alternative perspectives can be presented and tested. A warlike footing has exactly the opposite effect, reducing the complexity of social and political life to focus on one outcome. As Rosanvallon explains, war "nationalizes people's life. Private activities [are] largely shaped by collective constraints."

Climate policy needs to do the opposite. It must be compatible with democracy; otherwise the threat to civilization will be much more than just changes to our physical environment. The alternative to the abolition of democratic governance is more democracy—making not only democracy and solutions more complex, but also enhancing the worldwide empowerment and knowledgeability of individuals, groups, and movements who work on environmental issues. As the world gradually transitions toward further denationalization of governance, democracies will produce new, multiple forms of social solidarity and obligations, strengthening local and regional capacities to respond to climate change, and enhancing the awareness of social interdependence. Examples include the widespread community and regional support of renewable energy in Germany—and the success of wind energy in Texas.

Efforts to simplify the global approach to climate change through a single international governance regime have failed. Now is the time to commit to democratic complexification that fosters creativity and experimentation in the pursuit of multiple desired goals. For those who think that there can be only one global pathway to addressing climate change, the erosion of democracy might seem to be "convenient." History, of both recent decades and centuries, tells us that suppression of social complexity undermines the capacity of societies to solve problems. Friedrich Hayek points out a paradoxical development: As science advances, it tends to strengthen the observation shared by many scientists that we should "aim at more deliberate and comprehensive control of all human activities." Hayek pessimistically adds, "It is for this reason that those intoxicated by the advance of knowledge so often become the enemies of freedom."

Recommended reading

James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2009).

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