

# An analysis of the problems with electoral politics in an age of climate change

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## Abstract

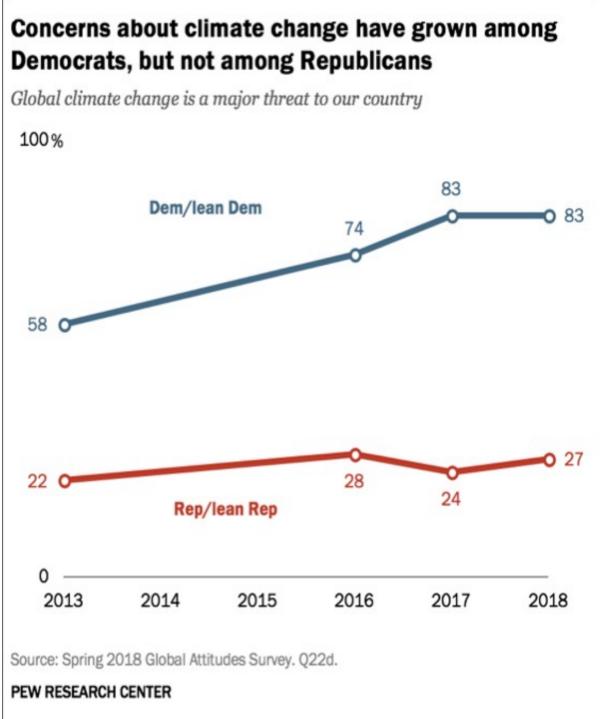
This essay addresses the extent to which the system of electoral politics acts as a limiting factor to the adoption of effective climate action. The basis of this essay is the argument that the sphere of electoral politics where the majority of climate action is considered, is a contributing factor to the continued failure of our planet to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Term limits cause world leaders to too often adopt a short-term outlook whereby the implementation of mitigation measures against climate change are overlooked and a focus on calls for immediate economic development take precedence over environmental issues. Through analysis of historic and modern case examples, both the complexity that underlies climate policymaking is highlighted, alongside how electoral politics acts as a barrier to effective climate action.

## Introduction

World leaders operating in the time-restricted bubble of electoral politics are vying for votes in order to stay in power. Climate change is often perceived to be a distant threat, affecting distant places (Kyselá, Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten, 2018) and term limits only amplify the concern that necessary mitigation measures against climate change will be delayed (Ibid.). This then raises fears that if leaders fail to be forward-thinking, they will take a traditional focus on economic development (Reeves, 2016) and with fossil fuels remaining such large economic drivers (The Economy and Fossil Fuels | The New Economics Party, n.d.) continued usage will solely act to intensify the climate crisis we face.

The aim of this essay is to explore to the extent which electoral politics on a global scale acts as a limited factor to the adoption of effective climate action. Currently, 57% of countries worldwide are considered to be democracies, meaning they face elections at the end of their terms (Desilver, 2019). And it's these elections and the desire to be elected & re-elected, that poses the greatest threat to climate action. This will be achieved through the analysis of historic and modern case examples, with each illustrating the role electoral politics plays in influencing climate policymaking.

## Figures



**Figure 1.** A graph showing the percentage of Democrats and Republicans that believe 'Global climate change is a major threat to our country' between 2013 and 2018. Democrats are illustrated by the blue line, while Republicans are illustrated by the red line. (Fagan and Huang, 2019).

## Case Studies

### The Global Community

The limitations of the United Nations (UN), and at extension the global community, serves as a major barrier to progress in relation to climate change (Clark, 2017). UN climate agreements are unable to forcefully commit countries into climate agreements or to ensure there are legal ramifications for failing to meet targets or backing out altogether. This is a fate UN issued climate agreements are bound to by legislation passed over 25 years ago at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (Jones, 2016).

### The United States of America

Modern-day disregard of climate action, in the interest of political expediency, is perhaps best illustrated with President Trump's 2015-2016 electoral campaign and his following presidential actions.

Trump's electoral campaign publicly denounced the Obama administration's climate policies and championed the United States' fossil fuel industry (Greshko et al., 2019). His election highlights the success he has experienced through hosting a political strategy that both plays into the population's fears and concerns of climate change, and actively polarizes the electorate, by focusing on climate scepticism (Viala-Gaufrey, 2020).

### The Maldives

The Maldives has no ground surface higher than three metres, making it one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to rising sea levels (Climate Hot Map. Sea-Level Rise in the Republic of Maldives | Global Warming Effects, n.d.).

However, the threat facing the Maldives hasn't stopped Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed - the current speaker of the People's Majlis, the legislative body of the Maldives, and formerly the 4<sup>th</sup> President of the Maldives from 11<sup>th</sup> November 2008 – 7<sup>th</sup> February 2012 push for climate action, both on a local and global levels. Nasheed rose to worldwide fame following the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.), where he pushed for a legally binding agreement that would limit temperature rise to 1.5°C (Ibid.). His actions in Copenhagen have been hailed as helping form the foundation of the Paris agreement in 2015, which remains the most significant piece of legislation regarding climate change to date (Ibid.).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the feature of term limits associated with electoral politics acts a limiting factor regarding climate action, both in the amount of climate action that can be undertaken by any given leader and through its encouragement to adopt a more selfish approach to policymaking. Acting in their country's best interests, in an attempt to secure re-election, rather than acting in the interests of the whole global community regarding the climate crisis.

With this said, we can see through the comparisons made between President Trump's actions in office and President Nasheed's, that ultimately the attitudes of a country's leader and the electorate are the key determining factors in relation to the pursuit of effective climate policymaking. The differing values the two leaders hold can be linked to the direct threat from climate change that the Maldives faces. President Nasheed recognised the necessity of climate action for both his country's and the planet's survival and sacrificed a path of traditional economic development to implement it.

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