

**Democracy's Divisive Position in Environmental Political Theory: A Comparative Analysis of
Denmark, China, and the USA**

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Hunter Hess

Advisors: Prof. Phoebe Crisman and Prof. Spencer Phillips

Abstract

The need to lower emissions to prevent catastrophic climate change is clear, but the political path to achieve such a future is unclear. The emerging field of environmental political theory is divided on the best form of governance to successfully mitigate the climate crisis. Liberal democracies around the world are dealing with climate change with various levels of success, while authoritarian regimes are providing a potential alternative path. This paper utilizes three environmental political frameworks that fall across the spectrum of theory: *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change* by Rebecca Willis, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy* by David Shearman and Joseph Wayne, and *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future* by Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright. To understand the strengths and weaknesses of each theory as well as the field as a whole, Denmark, China, and the United States are used to see how the theories perform in the real world and extrapolate issues that are hindering the efficacy of environmental political theory in securing positive sustainable governance. This analysis concludes with three main findings: environmental theory is too broad in its scope, effective frameworks must focus on the domestic political level, and new environmental political theories should work to provide specific guidance and policy reforms to reach its end goal.

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Introduction

During the Age of Enlightenment, intellectual theorists like Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau were creating political theories and philosophies to question absolutism and begin discussions around democratic principles. Today, a new school of philosophy is emerging—environmental political theory. Environmental political theory emphasizes the importance of sustainable policies to our planetary survival, allowing the questioning of the current systems and ideals we abide by. Though philosophers of the past began pushing for democracy and freedom, democratic institutions are a divisive topic within environmental political theory and the efficacy of liberal democratic institutions are being analyzed. To understand the field, it is important to read examples of existing literature throughout the spectrum. This paper will utilize three theoretical frameworks to gain a better understanding of the field: Rebecca Willis' pro-democratic argument *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*, David Shearman and Joseph Wayne's eco-authoritarian theory *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*, and Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright's green economic piece *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future*. These three theories provide a necessary introduction to the landscape of environmental political theory.

Using these three theoretical frameworks, this paper uses the countries of Denmark, China, and the United States to critically analyze these theories and see if they show any promise in real world political systems. These case studies help expose the strengths and weaknesses of each argument—all of them get some things right, but not everything. Looking at Denmark, it is clear that Willis' argument for strengthening democracy is true, but it does not allow for any form of authoritarianism, which has shown some promise in China's recent investments in sustainable infrastructure. The cases are compared to one another to show where environmental political theory is lacking, and how it may be improved to provide us a better guide to confronting the climate crisis. By using these three nations to critically analyze the existing breadth of existing environmental political theory, it is possible to deduce three general problems with environmental theory: it is too broad in its scope, environmental political theories must become focused on the domestic level, and theoretical frameworks must avoid making blanket statements by providing specific guidance to fostering sustainable political systems,

A Survey of Environmental Political Theory

Though liberal democracy is commonplace today, the current field of environmental political theory is very divided in its views of democratic governance and institutions. The one thing that connects all of the theories is their understanding of climate science: it is clear that current systems of governance are effectively managing the climate crisis. Rebecca Willis writes a theory that believes democracy is the right path and the world just needs more of it, while David Shearman and Joseph Wayne believe that eco-

authoritarianism is the correct answer. Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright take a third route by predicting that a green form of capitalism will emerge to protect economic elites. These three theories help illustrate the wide variety of ideas that exist within environmental political theory.

Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change

Rebecca Willis, the author of *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*, is a firm believer in democracy. She unashamedly puts forth an optimistic argument in favor of democracy as the agent that will solve the climate crisis. The book is a direct response to climate theorists and scientists like James Lovelock, founder of the Gaia Hypothesis, that believe democracy needs to be “put on hold” in order to effectively deal with climate change.¹ Willis understands that this argument comes directly from a dissatisfaction with democratic governments and institutions around the world and from an overall lack of action on confronting the climate crisis. While seeing the validity of democratic anger, Willis is not convinced that any authority exists other than democratic systems and believes that liberal societies are beginning to see a positive trend of democratic with activists such as Greta Thunberg and the Sunrise Movement.² Through over two decades of experience in climate politics in three different democratic nations, Willis has found that social consensus understands that action is needed on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but it is not at the top of priority list, which she finds to be evident across her many interviews with members of parliaments and their experiences with voters in the United Kingdom.³ She argues that this can be seen in both the international and domestic realms. No effective international governance has been instituted which can be seen in the failure of the Kyoto Protocols, the first major international agreement on lowering emissions, and the subsequent US withdrawal. While she is hopeful that the new ‘pledge and review’ process of the Paris Summit that does not focus on burden-sharing may induce positive change, her argument is primarily a domestic one.⁴

Although Willis focuses on the domestic realm of democratic politics, she does not believe that current democratic domestic politics will solve the problem of climate change. She looks at how Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was voted out of office for supporting a carbon tax and how the rise of right-wing populism across the democratic world has created obstacles for the implementation of positive climate policy.⁵ Along with a decline in trust in government all throughout the political spectrum and growing partisanship, Willis understands that democracy is in crisis. She finds the lack of trust in government to be a major issue since climate action requires government action. Willis attributes the lack

¹Willis, Rebecca. *Too Hot to Handle?: The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*. Bristol University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529206036>, 2

² Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 5

³ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 15

⁴ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 28

⁵ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 34

of action from democratic governments to Timothy Mitchell's idea of the 'carbon democracy.' A carbon democracy is one that is subservient to corporate fossil fuel interest. These interests have shaped our social, political, and economic norms, making it taboo or a nonstarter to bring climate concerns into political debate. This is part of the concerted effort by fossil fuel interests to falsely dispute climate science, fund political campaigns, and exploit the psychological effect of denial.⁶

After over twenty years of climate negotiations and policy, emissions are still rising. Willis criticizes democratic politicians for only focusing on the supply side of energy and broad goals with no actionable steps of accountability. By leaving the people out of the process, democratic politicians have created a self-fulfilling prophecy of inaction due to a lack of democratic outreach in the formation of climate policy.⁷ Willis sees a need to actively rethink what democratic representation means—it should be a dialogue, not a one-way form of communication. She looks to the Irish Citizens' Assembly as an example. The assembly has brought citizens directly together with legislators to discuss constitutional questions that include climate change. It brings randomly selected citizens, experts, and politicians directly together to propose solutions. The results have been that people want more radical measures than expected, and they especially value local programs. Similar results have occurred in France, where a new body full of citizens has actual power in enacting climate policy, and even in the United States, where a local Texas community council voted to invest in renewable energy sources in 1999.⁸ Willis' argument is one of realism that rejects politicians that only speak positively and prioritizes dialogue between citizens and politicians that exists outside of the technical, expert level and emphasizes the local, personal level. She writes about a form of environmental radicalism that focuses on transformation through citizen involvement and an immediate political transition away from fossil fuels, primarily through a ban on political funding from fossil fuel interests and less corporate-reliant institutions.⁹ Willis ends by providing a checklist for climate policymakers that looks at the goals, leadership, equity concerns, and financials of a potential policy to gauge its effectiveness.

Willis presents an argument that refuses to consider an authoritarian alternative to democracy. *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change* is based on the principles of freedom, human rights, and equity. Even in the face of warnings of catastrophic climate change, liberal democracy is the only option in the theory. The argument is strongest when it points to examples of citizens wanting more radical measures to confront the impending crisis and utilizing that power to support government institutions in tackling climate issues. The argument rests on the idea that democracy can separate itself from the influence of corporate and fossil fuel interests. Willis is very clear in explaining why it is

⁶ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 60

⁷ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 82

⁸ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 91

⁹ Willis, *Too Hot to Handle?*, 111

important to distance the political from these actors—in order to free political actors from corruption or coercion—yet she is unable to provide a clear path for democracies to escape the control of corporate actors.

The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy

David Shearman and Joseph Wayne propose a very different political theory compared to Wilson in *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*: Democracy has failed and a turn to eco-authoritarianism is the only option. The authors make it clear that they are aware of the bad environmental record of authoritarian regimes, but still believe that a specific type of authoritarianism is the answer to solving the climate crisis. The main argument against democracy can be summarized best through their own words: “Liberal democracy and its institutions have become a mechanism for powerful nations to control the world by commercial invasion, and sometimes crusading wars are launched to deliver it to nonbelievers.”¹⁰ Shearman and Wayne find that liberal democracy is built to trick the average citizen into going into wars and supporting market growth no matter the cost. Due to the interconnection of democracy and capitalism and their symbiotic development, the authors reject democracy at all levels due to the primacy given to the market and personal ownership in liberal systems.¹¹ The market-minded society we exist in is unable to consider long-term costs like climate change, and only focuses on short-term economic gains according to Shearman and Wayne. Liberalism’s prioritization of the individual is problematic in their view, exposing why they believe democracy is ecologically flawed: the social system will always result in the tragedy of the commons.¹² As with communist regimes, the authors predict that democracy will be just another moment in human history, while authoritarianism will emerge steady as it always has. They are theorizing a new type of authoritarianism that carries the same “brilliance of Napoleon.”¹³

Similarly, to Willis, Shearman and Wayne cite the Kyoto Protocols as a major failure of liberal democracy. Instead of a reaching a conclusion in favor of democracy, the two authors use this event to explain why democracy has failed, and will continue to fail, and why a form of authoritarianism is the correct path for society. They look to the democratic dependency on oil in the global economy as an addiction and find that even Scandinavian countries that have made progress in reducing their need for oil have made little overall progress and are still economically tied to fossil fuel interests.¹⁴ Another major component of their argument is the availability of knowledge but the lack of action: the depletion of

¹⁰ Shearman, David and Joseph Wayne J. C. *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*. 1st edition. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007.3

¹¹ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 11

¹² Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 13

¹³ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 16

¹⁴ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 36

biodiversity from human actions and rising temperatures from carbon emission have humanity on a track for disaster, but liberal democracies are not acting with a sense of urgency. Quickly growing populations are a concern for the capacity the planet can handle, which leads Shearman and Wayne to recognize China as the only nation, and an authoritarian one, to ever address this problem through the one child rule.¹⁵ This lack of action is directly tied to the individual nature of liberalism in their opinion, which supports corporatism and growth by ignoring any issues that exist within the commons.

Outside of the individualistic nature alone, Shearman and Wayne do not believe that liberal democracies are truly free. They see democracy as a haven of self-interests, hindered by the undemocratic principle of majority rule. When one group decides what is right, everyone else must follow along, even when they disagree. The authors believe in an argument that rests on the idea that majority rule is no different than an authoritarian regime that acts in its own idea of the “greater good.”¹⁶ They believe representative democracy is a form of dictatorship in itself—a day of voting followed by several years of authoritarianism. Though people may care about the environment, they theorize that it will never become the most salient issues among voters due to the focus on economic growth and consumerism, meaning that the climate will always take the backseat in democratic policy priorities. Politicians are short-term caretakers and careerists in their eyes, incapable of making decisions to solve long-term issues. Their solution to the liberal failure of democracy is not anarchism, but rather a strong autocratic state.¹⁷

Shearman and Wayne argue that orthodox liberal politics has already come to an end. Even if functional democracies are possible, they believe the forces that corrupt them are too powerful. Democracy is an illusion in their eyes and the sophistication of lies to the general public control thinking and innovation. Rather than a democracy, the authors label democratic societies as a plutocracy ruled by the wealthy. They give several examples to back up this claim such as the grip pharmaceutical companies have on medical research and development along with the historical examples of Standard Oil assisting the German war effort in World War II and the planned campaign to spread false news about research on the effects of tobacco products by the industry. All of these deception tactics used in the past to assimilate citizens into a certain view or go behind their back are being used by the fossil fuel companies of today according to their argument.¹⁸ In addition to an almost unregulated political donation system in the United States and other parts of the world, the authors write that the market and consumer-oriented nature of liberal democracies are unable to effectively mitigate climate change. Paired with a military industrial complex in which liberal democracies take up nine of the fourteen highest military budgets in the world, Shearman and Wayne have no hope for democracy.

¹⁵ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 68

¹⁶ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 79

¹⁷ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 84

¹⁸ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 93

While Willis unashamedly supports democracy, Shearman and Wayne support eco-authoritarianism. They believe authoritarianism is deeply rooted in human nature, and even liberal democracies gravitate towards it through the formation of political parties, hierarchical corporate structures, and obedience from the voting minority. The ethos of liberal democracy in their opinion If authoritarian tendencies are going to occur regardless, they recommend that liberal democracies make a transition to a just authoritarian society. Liberal democracy is tied to continued growth they write, which prevents the formation of an ethos valuing nature and all life, making the form of governance incompatible with effective climate policy.¹⁹ When ecological scarcity eventually prevents capitalistic growth, the system will collapse according to their theory, leading them to their own creative form of authoritarianism using the technocratic governing structure of Singapore as inspiration.²⁰ They are not arguing for fascism or communism, but rule by an educated elite. If authoritarianism is natural, they argue that it is best if highly educated individuals control the governing system. Not one individual will rule, but a class that has learned about the issues of the world in a new light. Shearman and Wayne believe that education today focuses on knowledge, fueled by growth and consumption, but they argue it must be reformed to teach wisdom—how to hold a worldview that respects equity, life, and, in the context of their book, the environment. After a lengthy explanation as to why democracy has failed, their solution is rather brief: instill wisdom into a group of people that is based in moral values of mutual respect, make them technocratic experts in health, the environment, and all other fields, and then give this group of people control of the country.²¹ Their goal is to contain individualistic human nature and the corporate greed of consumerism by building a just form of authoritarianism.

Shearman and Wayne devote the majority of their book to discussing why democracy is doomed and how the climate crisis will lead to its collapse. They believe liberal democracy is not free, it creates and widens inequalities, and that corporate greed will always win. Their argument is almost the antithesis of Willis', concluding that democracy cannot be reformed due to its linkage to market capitalism. While their reasons for why democracy is failing are convincing and their creative approach to an authoritarian solution is thought provoking, they fail to specify how an authoritarian transition will occur, or how it will continue to resist similar powers that corrupted liberal democracy in their eyes and sustain their idea of an educational system based around moral wisdom. It is also difficult to understand what they mean by moral wisdom and how it will meet climate goals in an equitable manner.

¹⁹ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 101

²⁰ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 125

²¹ Shearman, *The Climate Change Challenge*, 141

Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future

Another side of the spectrum of environmental political theory is Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright's *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future*. Unlike the previous two theories, Mann and Wainwright's theory values human agency. They do not predict one possible path, but rather several based on the actions of humanity today and in the coming years and decades. Unlike Shearman and Wayne, these authors do not write off liberal capitalism. They argue that it is already governing the climate crisis, so it is easier to rethink this system rather than destroying it and starting over.²² The main path they see for society is what they call the "Climate Leviathan," referencing Thomas Hobbes' influential piece of political theory *Leviathan* that was written almost 350 years earlier. The Climate Leviathan is their main addition to the theoretical field, which finds that capitalist-social relations are always driven by economic growth and the ruling elite will create a governing system that begins to restrict personal freedoms in order to continue economic growth by promising environmental stability through strategic choices on who is allowed to emit and in what manner. Though this path is highly variable in their opinion, it is the most likely under current economic and political conditions.²³ Out of the Climate Leviathan will emerge a capitalist sovereign that grants carbon permits to actors with the most economic potential and invests in renewable energy systems only when it is the most profitable, all while keeping environmental sustainability in mind to avoid catastrophic climate change.

Though the Leviathan makes up the bulk of their argument, Mann and Wainwright postulate that other scenarios could occur depending on if US capitalist hegemony continues, or if China becomes the global economic power. If China, or possibly another socialist state, led a world environmental movement, or even one just within its own borders, it could lead to scenario that they call "Climate Mao." In the Climate Mao, a non-capitalist authority takes over. In terms of sovereignty, it is similar to the Climate Leviathan, but it does not necessarily target profit and growth. Instead, it would target equalizing and then lowering emissions. China has made massive progress in green energy, but it also has benefitted from the Climate Leviathan the authors argue, making it unlikely that the Climate Mao would form on a large scale compared to the Leviathan.²⁴

The other potential path Mann and Wainwright outline is the one they hope we avoid due to the negative consequence called the "Climate Behemoth." The Behemoth is a reactionary form of anti-state democracy that would be funded by fossil fuel elites. In this scenario, humanity does nothing to lower greenhouse gas emissions and we continue to emit greenhouse gases at the current level. By going full-

²² Mann, Geoff, and Joel Wainwright. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. Verso Books, 2020, 12

²³ Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 15

²⁴ Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 41

speed into catastrophic climate change, resources would become scarce, leading to competition among nations, leading to dangerous nationalism and social divisions.²⁵ On the flip side, the last possibility they offer is known as “Climate X.” The authors do not dwell on it too much because they think it is rather overly-optimistic, but they hope it comes true. In this theoretical scenario, the people are given the power and organize in mass-driven formations, demanding climate action through bottom-up democracy.²⁶

The authors stick primarily to an economic argument because they do not believe moral or political arguments are able to overcome the economic structures of the world. They think reforming our current economic system and giving power to the market is the most likely solution to the climate crisis in order to preserve current capitalist-social relations. Their main idea here is that the capitalism will morph into a “Green Keynesianism,” investing in social welfare and new green technologies, ensuring that the burden of energy transitions and carbon permitting does not completely leave low-income communities behind. Unlike the other theories, Mann and Wainwright do not see the formation of an equitable society in climate solutions. Instead, they theorize that the capitalist structures will become stronger by guaranteeing environmental stability and, hopefully, basic needs, but all in order to drive a profit for the economic elites of society.²⁷ They picture a “Green Bretton Woods” system, where investment in carbon reducing technologies and efficiency becomes the new drivers of growth and the ideology of consumerism is weakened.

Mann and Wainwright created an environmental theory that does not try to predict the exact future by giving leaders and citizens agency and instead looks at our current economic structures to predict the most likely path. Furthermore, the *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future* is the least ambitious of the three theories, potentially giving it legitimacy. It stays within the bounds of our current system and looks to reform it. The theory also does not try critiquing another system to advance itself by advancing ideas for how a form of “green capitalism” may come to light. On a more critical note, the theory is highly dependent on international cooperation for success, yet it does not show how governments of different types could come together to create a harmonious but still capitalistic and inequitable Climate Leviathan. Interestingly, even though they believe capitalism can solve the climate crisis, the authors do not simultaneously try to defend democratic principles.

Potential Quantitative Support for Theories

While each theory provides substantial historical evidence to support its argument, it is clear that these theories do not align with each other. Some political scientists have taken a more quantitative route in looking at how effective democratic institutions and governments are at reducing CO₂ emissions. In her

²⁵ Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 44

²⁶ Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 46

²⁷ Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 111

article “The Limits of Democracy in Tackling Climate Change,” Marina Povitkina finds that democracy is only better suited to lower emissions in low corruption contexts, meaning that corporate interests do not affect bureaucratic monitoring and regulatory processes. She uses CO₂ emissions compared to the number of entryways corporate and nongovernmental interests have in influencing governance and how they can affect election outcomes. When corruption exists within democratic regimes, Povitkina finds that there is lower trust in government, less tax revenue, and a lack of commitment to the climate crisis. She concludes that democracies that have low levels of corruption do better than authoritarian regimes in lowering emissions, but democratic governments with higher levels of corruption do not perform any better.²⁸ This potentially supports Willis’ idea that more democracy can lower emissions

Another study by Torbjørn Selseng et al titled “Unpacking democracy: The effects of different democratic qualities on climate change performance over time” looks at the strength of different democratic qualities across 122 different countries including fair and free elections, civil rights, horizontal accountability, equality under the law, and political rights. They analyze these democratic qualities independently and together across nations to see if any correlation exists between strong democratic institutions and lower emissions. Though they emphasize that democracies are better at reducing inequalities and respecting human rights, they find no evidence that stronger democratic institutions and qualities lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions.²⁹ This study conflicts with Povitkina’s findings, and potentially gives validity to a non-democratic environmental theory.

Case Studies

To analyze how environmental political theories play out in the real world and gauge their strengths and weaknesses, it is necessary to understand the historical and contemporary climate mitigation efforts of nations of various types to help bolster or criticize current leading political theories. In this section, three countries are used as case studies due to their governmental structures and various levels of success on implementing green policies: Denmark, China, and the United States. These three countries span the environmental political spectrum. Denmark is a parliamentary democracy that has a long history in the development of renewable energy source and performs better than any other country in terms of implementing climate mitigation policies. China, an authoritarian regime, and the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has made massive investments in green infrastructure in a short period of time. Lastly,

²⁸ Povitkina, Marina. “The Limits of Democracy in Tackling Climate Change.” *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 3 (May 1, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1444723>.

²⁹ Selseng, Torbjørn, Kristin Linnerud, and Erling Holden. “Unpacking Democracy: The Effects of Different Democratic Qualities on Climate Change Performance over Time.” *Environmental Science and Policy* 128 (February 1, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.12.009>.

the United States is a representative democracy entrenched by fossil fuel interests and has implemented very little meaningful climate policy.

Denmark

Denmark, a liberal parliamentary democracy, has made great strides in enacting climate mitigating policies and investing in renewable energy sources. The country has substantially reduced greenhouse gas emissions since the mid-1990s and has recently passed legislation to reduce emissions by 70% by 2030 relative to 1990 levels and plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.³⁰ By 2030, the government plans on completely phasing out cars that operate via internal combustion engines (ICE vehicles) and replacing the fleet completely with electric vehicles (EVs). The recent law breaks emissions down by economic sector, setting targets for transportation, buildings, and agriculture and increases renewable energy usage by 55% while simultaneously phasing out coal.³¹ This is all in addition to the carbon pricing that has already been part of the Danish economy since the 1990s. In terms of democratic states, the recent Danish climate law passed in 2020 is one of the most effective examples of modern climate policy. Every five years, legislators must reevaluate the current level of emissions and make legally binding changes that instruct all emitting actors to change their behaviors in order to stay in line with climate goals. The policy has been widely popular among the Danish people, with over 46% of voters stating that the climate is their top priority. The minority party in power, the Social Democratic Party, worked with four other parties to draft the recent climate bill, and with expert legislative maneuvering and Danish laws, the multi-partisan law is virtually impossible to overturn until 2050.³²

The Danish climate story is one of innovation and transformation. In the 1970s, Denmark was primarily dependent on foreign oil like most western liberal democracies at the time. After the OPEC oil embargo-induced energy crisis, the Danish government pledged to become self-reliant and move towards more sustainable energy sources.³³ The Danish strategy contains a combination of three basic components: grassroots mobilization, state intervention, and a diversified system of public ownership. These three tenets helped lead to the sustainable and democratically-based economy of today. After the energy crisis, the government began making massive investments in wind energy, choosing this path instead of nuclear due to public support. The government funded 30% of all new wind energy

³⁰ Batini, Nicoletta, Ian W. H. Parry, Philippe Wingender, and Miguel A. Segoviano. “Climate Mitigation Policy in Denmark: A Prototype for Other Countries.” *IMF Working Papers* 2020, no. 235 (November 12, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513560960.001.A001., 3>

³¹ Batini, “Climate Mitigation Policy,” 5

³² Bellefonds, Colleen de. “Denmark’s Aggressive New Climate Law.” *US News & World Report*. Accessed April 5, 2022. <http://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-01-07/denmarks-aggressive-new-climate-law-blazes-path-for-developed-countries>.

³³ Cumbers, Andrew. “Making Space for Economic Democracy: The Danish Wind Power Revolution.” *UNRISD*. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://www.unrisd.org>.

construction projects and eventually required utility companies to purchase a certain amount of renewable energy through a moving quota which grew very quickly throughout the 1990s. In addition to these investments, the government began to encourage local and collective ownership of wind turbines, passing a law limiting wind turbine ownership to those living within the municipality that it is located within. This new level of community participation in the wind turbine process is largely responsible for the success and levels of participation that early wind farms reached. Though collective ownership has seen a decline in recent years due to bigger and more complex projects, at its peak in 2003, 150,000 families were involved in owning wind turbines throughout Denmark—around 10% of the population. This gave families an economic benefit through the direct result of local activism, leading over 70% of the population to support the development of windfarms.³⁴

In addition to collective ownership, the state also diversified and democratized its system of electricity distribution. Instead of a few distributors of energy on the relatively small Scandinavian peninsula, the Danish government formed a decentralized, democratic, and cooperative distribution system through over one-hundred municipal distribution companies. The majority of these companies are cooperatives or municipally-controlled, meaning that voters either directly elect the members of the utility board, or that the local government appoints the leaders.³⁵ Though not completely immune to special interests, the decentralized system prevented any single force, inside or outside of government, from effectively ‘capturing’ the direction of projects or policy. The focus on local control and direct participation in the construction of wind turbines and electricity distribution garnered massive support for the renewable energy source. The democratic force that propelled wind growth in Denmark gave the citizens a chance to both have a say in the direction of local projects and receive economic benefits due to a focus on public ownership.³⁶ Today, half of danish electricity come from wind and Denmark is home to Vestas, the largest wind turbine manufacturer in the world. The average Dane emits three times less than the average American, and this was all done by prioritizing democracy and without hindering economic growth.³⁷

On the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), an independent monitoring tool that tracks countries’ climate protection performance, Denmark ranks higher than any other country in the world, meaning that Denmark is putting forth the most effective and most sustainable climate mitigation efforts and policies in the world.³⁸ Though they are the highest ranked nation, it is important to note that the

³⁴ Cumbers, “Making Space”

³⁵ Cumbers, “Making Space”

³⁶ Cumbers, “Making Space”

³⁷ Bellefonds, “Denmark’s Aggressive New Climate Law”

³⁸ Burck, Jan, Thea Uhlich, Christoph Bals, Niklas Höhne (NewClimate Institute), Leonardo Nascimento (NewClimate Institute), Ana Tamblyn, and Jonas Reuther. “The Climate Change Performance Index 2022: Results | Germanwatch e.V.” Accessed April 10, 2022. <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/21110>.

CCPI still only gives Denmark a ranking of 4th due to the fact that the measures Denmark is taking still are not enough: if every country in the world were to be utilizing the same climate policies as Denmark, we would still see temperatures increase above 1.5 degrees Celsius. Though Denmark is a clear leader in climate policy, it still must do more to avoid the worst effects of climate change. Since Denmark has such effective climate policies already, the IMF has released initiatives the country could implement to close the gap in a paper that refers to Denmark as “a prototype” for other countries. These recommendations include a higher \$200-250 carbon tax that is used to lower other taxes, a sliding ‘feebate’ that raises the price of activities and products that go above average emissions, and paying more attention to agricultural and consumerist sectors.³⁹

China

China, the world’s biggest emitter of greenhouse gases as well as the most populous authoritarian regime in the world ran by the Communist Party, has taken a more proactive role in climate mitigation. While the rise of right-wing populism in many liberal democracies saw many governments around the world pull back from climate pledges, China has remained relatively steadfast in its commitments and climate mitigation strategies, putting it in a position to take a more leading role on the global stage.⁴⁰ Currently, China is on track to reach peak emissions by 2030, meeting their pledge in the Paris agreement. In some estimates, China has already surpassed their peak emission levels, but it is difficult to confirm due to a lack of accountability in reporting. China has also begun to see a decline in the annual usage of coal, even though it still makes up the vast majority of the country’s energy footprint. The renewable energy sector in China, though still a small part of the entire energy economy, is growing by around 20% each year, with a particular focus on solar, wind, and nuclear energy sources.⁴¹ There are several drivers of China’s low-carbon development in China. One is energy security, as China has become the major industrial force of the world, it has relied upon foreign resources to fuel its growth. Renewable sources of energy give China more control over its future growth. Another factor is poor air quality throughout many Chinese cities—less greenhouse gases will lead to cleaner air. In terms of growth, the new sector gives China another manufacturing opportunity to continue its economic rise in power. A focus on renewable energy also allows China to deflect accusations of human rights abuses and labor violations from the international community due to their potential leadership in the field. Lastly, and most importantly, low-carbon development works well with an authoritarian regime like China—the leadership does not need to worry as much about public perception to quickly implement sustainable policies.⁴²

³⁹ Batini, “Climate Mitigation Policy,” 15

⁴⁰ Engels, Anita. “Understanding How China Is Championing Climate Change Mitigation.” *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (August 14, 2018): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0150-4>.

⁴¹ Engels, “Understanding How China”

⁴² Engels, “Understanding How China”

Though China is very authoritarian in structure, the interests pushing for or against low carbon development do not necessarily come from one command post. There are many-sub-systems within the Chinese Communist Party affecting climate policy. Many business actors within state-owned enterprises are pushing for the development of renewable energy structures in order to expand into new business areas. These actors work with various agencies and ministries throughout the communist party at the local, regional, and national levels to pull climate policy in multiple direction. This upsets the top-down structure that many scholars use to analyze Chinese climate policy. Municipal actors also have their own agendas. For example, recently, two cities in China worked with the national government to secure solar water heating systems.⁴³ While these many actors in the Chinese system make sure that climate policy is not just carried out at the national level, it does leave open the possibility that may lead to conflict with fossil fuel interests in the future. It is important to note that China has become more centralized in recent years under the rule of Xi Jinping, potentially altering the system of local and regional participation in climate policy.⁴⁴

China has accomplished major feats, such as lifting more people out of poverty than any other nation in history and dominating global manufacturing in a short period. In terms of climate policy, China has also made some remarkable progress. They are currently the largest producer of electric vehicles (EVs), surpassing western companies like Tesla. They are also the leading manufacturer of solar panels and solar technology, taking charge of the manufacturing processes that will help power the global green energy transition.⁴⁵ While all of this is promising, it does not detract from the fact that China is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. Though China is a young industrial nation, if their emission levels do not decrease, they will struggle to meet their carbon neutrality target of 2060. If every country in the world was following China's emission trends currently, temperatures would rise 3-4 degrees Celsius, ending in catastrophic climate change, and as the most populous nation in the world, it is crucial that China takes swift action.⁴⁶ On the CCPI, China ranks 38th out of the 64 highest emitters included in the index. Its positioning near the middle of the index highlights it major strides in effective climate policy in the last decade, coming in higher than the United States, but China has a lot of work to do in order to reach a sustainable level of greenhouse gas emissions.⁴⁷

⁴³ Engels, "Understanding How China"

⁴⁴ Zhang, Yunhan, Jan Orbie, and Sarah Delputte. "China's Climate Change Policy: Central–Local Governmental Interaction." *Environmental Policy and Governance* 30, no. 3 (2020): 128–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1878>.

⁴⁵ Mookerjee, Ishika. "China's Hot EV and Solar Stocks Have More Room to Run, Funds Say." Bloomberg.Com, July 3, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-03/china-s-hot-ev-and-solar-stocks-have-more-room-to-run-funds-say>.

⁴⁶ Climate Action Tracker, "Countries." Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/>.

⁴⁷ Burck, "The Climate Change Performance Index"

United States

The United States is one of the countries with the worst record of successfully implementing effective climate mitigation policies in the world. Most recently, President Joe Biden's Build Back Better plan, the most ambitious piece of climate legislation ever supported by an American president, failed to pass in the US Senate, even while the Democrats hold the chamber by the slimmest of margins. This is not a new problem in the liberal democratic system. Matto Mildenberger, a professor of political science at the University of California, says it is difficult to pass climate reform in democracy in general due to the issue of the commons, but it is even more of a problem in the United States. Mildenberger explains how fossil fuel interests enjoy a form of "double representation." On the left politicians are hesitant to confront fossil fuel interests due to entrenched labor unions and industrial workers, while on the right politicians are catering to fossil fuel corporate and business interest. In other liberal democracies, there are stricter laws and campaign reforms controlling how fossil fuel interests interact with government agencies and politicians, preventing these interests from becoming too strong, yet in the USA, fossil fuel interests have always had a seat at the table in political discourse. This makes it easier to block policy change rather than create it.⁴⁸ As liberal democracies go, the United States is one of the poorest performers in terms of climate mitigation, and as one of the largest emitters on the planet, the obstacles to policy formation are a crucial issue.

Since Obama's 2009 climate plan was rejected by Congress and Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris climate agreement in 2017, US government climate leadership and activism has been almost nonexistent. While many democracies throughout the world are parliamentary systems, the United States is a presidential system. This makes the creation of meaningful climate policies more difficult since it is possible that the party controlling the presidency will not also hold the legislature, and as we have seen as of late, the leads to a lack of cooperation, and as administrations change, policies are easily repealed. And even if the President's party is in power, climate bills are still often struck down. This is due to two components in the American legislature: the composition of the Senate and hyperpolarization. In the United States Senate, every state has two representatives no matter the size of its population. This gives small states with economies centralized around fossil fuels a disproportionate amount of power in deciding on legislation. In terms of hyperpolarization, the two political parties of the United States agree on very little, and controversial bills are at a much greater likelihood of failing due to a lack of

⁴⁸ Osaka, Shannon. "Is the U.S. Uniquely Bad at Tackling Climate Change? » Yale Climate Connections." *Yale Climate Connections*, January 12, 2022. <http://yaleclimateconnections.org/2022/01/is-the-u-s-uniquely-bad-at-tackling-climate-change/>.

cooperation between political parties.⁴⁹ While radical plans like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's "Green New Deal," have been proposed, they have been largely dismissed by members of both political parties.

Throughout the last seventy-five, the United States has made some progress in climate policy with the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the instrumental court ruling *Massachusetts vs. EPA* that gave the agency the power to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Since then, the introduction of new meaningful federal climate policies has been sparse, but some states like California and Washington have made large investments in the renewable energy sector and have made a pledge to follow the stipulations of the Paris agreement with or without assistance from the federal government.⁵⁰ Despite these small steps forward, the United States has failed at implementing any large scale policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Currently, the United States emits more CO₂ per capita than both China and Denmark. Their emission levels are leading the world to around three degrees of warming if every other nation were to be emitting at their levels.⁵¹ On the CCPI, the United States ranks at 55th in the world, making them fall in lowest 10% of countries tracked.⁵² This means that the United States is not implementing any substantive climate policies at the moment to curb emissions. Even though China is currently emitting more greenhouse gases in total compared to the US, China is ranked lower due to its promising climate programs and policies.

Applying Case to Theory

The cases of Denmark, China, and the United States are examples of various government types, dealing, or not dealing, with climate mitigation strategies. The Danish case shows how an emphasis on democratization and cooperation can yield positive climate policies. The Chinese example does the opposite, showing how an authoritarian regime has made great strides in climate policy, even if it is still emitting large amounts of greenhouse gases. The last case, the United States, is a prime instance of a liberal democracy entrenched by fossil fuel interests and hyperpolarization, preventing any meaningful progress on climate mitigation. Together, these unique cases can help expose the strengths and weaknesses found in Willis', Shearman and Wayne's, and Mann and Wainwright's theoretical arguments.

The argument for democracy

Willis provides a knowingly optimistic argument stating that making political systems more democratic is the only solution to the climate crisis—if we involve the masses, it will be a better and more

⁴⁹ Osaka, "Is the U.S. Uniquely Bad?"

⁵⁰ Arroyo, Vicki. "Maryland Journal of International Law Symposium Keynote Address: A Brief Hi...: EBSCOhost." Accessed April 5, 2022.

<https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d0377a3f-191b-4309-8661-9ec4c0135d5c%40redis>.

⁵¹ Climate Action Tracker, "Countries."

⁵² Burck, "The Climate Change Performance Index"

just outcome for everyone. The Danish cases seemingly supports Willis' argument in *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*. Through a half-century of climate policy that has emphasized local involvement and community ownership in the construction of wind farms and electricity distribution, Denmark is leading the world in successfully reducing greenhouse gas emissions as a liberal democracy. Willis looks to citizen councils in Ireland and France as golden opportunities in advancing climate policy because they exemplify that people do care about climate change. Denmark fits well into this framework, because it has already implemented local policy procedures for decades with largely successful results—mitigating emissions without infringing on the quality of life. Denmark serves as an excellent model for Willis, giving her theory a real world supporting example.

Though Denmark advances her argument, the other two cases make its applicability to the real world much more difficult. China proves that authoritarianism can provide substantive results. Though China has a long way to go before it can be considered a sustainable nation by any means, it has made progress in solar power and EVs in a very short amount of time, supporting the claim that authoritarianism can provide effective results. It is unclear how Willis' theory reckons with the recent success of China, an authoritarian regime. Denmark's investments in renewables have been a decades-long sustained effort, while China has become the leading manufacturer of solar panels and EVs in less than two decades. Though concerns for human rights and equity in an authoritarian regime are more than valid, Willis believes only pure democratic regimes and movements have the capability to confront the climate crisis, but the recent positive developments in China begin to question Willis' framework.

Even if China is unable to reach a level of sustainable emissions as an authoritarian government, the case of the United States also complicates Willis' framework. The United States is undoubtedly a liberal democracy, but it has failed in implementing successful climate policies or programs that reduce emissions. Willis points out that countries like the United States are beholden to fossil fuels, but she does not outline how a captured democratic system can escape these external forces in shaping policy. She provides a checklist for policymakers to determine if a potential policy is sustainable or equitable, but that assumes that fossil fuel interests have already been taken out of the system. The lack of clarity on how unsustainable liberal democracies should move forward makes it difficult to insert the United States into the theory—Willis explains why it is important to inject more democracy in climate policy formulation, but she does not explicitly say how a country like the United States can accomplish such a feat. If her theory were completely true, we should see America, a democracy, performing better than China, an authoritarian regime, in implementing climate policy, but that is not the truth.

The argument against democracy

On the other side of the environmental political theoretical spectrum sits Shearman and Wayne's framework for an eco-authoritarian future. China's recent investments in sustainable infrastructure have

been promising, and even though Shearman and Wayne do not use China as an example in advancing their argument, potentially because they wrote their book before many of these developments occurred, it is a potential applicable example of a nation that fits into their framework. The foundation of Shearman and Wayne's argument rests on the fact that liberal democratic institutions are tied too tightly to capitalistic ideas of growth, meaning that they are incompatible with effective sustainable policies. As mentioned earlier, they recommend a technocratic elite ruling class that is well-versed in the wisdom of sustainability and equity, making decisions that benefit everyone. They think if we are going to have a ruling class, we must make it one that is educated in a proper moral code. Though this description does not necessarily match the elite of the Chinese Communist Party, China is a one-party state with many technocratic processes, avoiding the waiting time of elections and legislative processes. This aspect of Chinese governance has allowed swift action in sustainable projects and developments. While China is still the world's largest emitter, the recent trends have been hopeful, and if they look to Shearman and Wayne's technocratic eco-authoritarian argument, it is possible that China may reach an acceptable level of emissions through radical climate policy in a relatively short amount of time.

China's sustainability initiatives might give hope to eco-authoritarianism, but the cases of Denmark and the United States are less accepting of such a framework. In the case of Denmark, not only are they outperforming every other democracy, but they are also doing better than every other nation in the world in terms of successful climate mitigation policies. It makes little sense to say eco-authoritarianism is the right prescription for Denmark when they are succeeding by a wide margin. Denmark is the highest ranked country on the CCPI, while China is 38th. In the case of the United States, perhaps an eco-authoritarian lens could work—democratic institutions have failed to implement any successful policies in the country in decades. Similarly, to Willis, Shearman and Wayne do not explain how a failing liberal democracy can transform into an eco-authoritarian regime. Though the United States is failing in terms of climate policy, it is a stable nation infatuated with freedom and individualism. Their argument in *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy* does not provide an answer to this theoretical dilemma.

The economic argument

Mann and Wainwright sketch out several possibilities for climate governance in *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory for Our Future*, but the main basis of their argument is that capitalism's goal is to constantly grow and make a profit, but the effects of climate change threaten this historic trend. In order to avert economic breakdown due to a climate catastrophe, Mann and Wainwright theorize that societies must submit to an economic sovereign that limits freedom and chooses who may emit greenhouse gases to maximize growth while limiting planetary warming and guaranteeing security. They believe that capitalistic forces are too strong to be overcome by a democratic solution. The case of United

States and its lack of action in implementing effective climate policy potentially supports Mann and Wainwright's theory—the profit-motivated fossil fuel industry has captured governmental institutions and contributed to hyperpolarization. They believe that instead of trying to transform governmental institutions and create new systems, it is easier to try to fix the capitalist system we live in by submitting to the market economy and reforming it to redefine growth in sustainable standards. Though Mann and Wainwright recognize the difficulty of transforming entrenched political institutions, they do not explain how an economy like the United States would quickly prioritize sustainable growth strategies. Currently, the corporate interests of America are hindering climate policy, and at current rates, the United States is headed towards an emissions path with disastrous consequences.⁵³ Mann and Wainwright believe the *Climate Leviathan* will emerge out of necessity to continue growth that will be inhibited by climate change, but current indicators do not show this trend. Even if the corporate interests of nations like the United States one day focus primarily on sustainable growth, it may be already too late to avoid some of the worst effects of climate change, exposing a weakness in their theory: a failure to consider the urgency of the climate crisis.

The cases of China and Denmark also do not fit well into the framework of Mann and Wainwright's theory. Though they mention the potential of a "Climate Mao," they do not believe this is the most likely path, focusing largely on an economic argument as the best solution to the climate crisis. Rooted largely in western liberal economics, they do not leave room for the command economy of China in their theory. Mann and Wainwright fail to describe how a sustainable economic sovereign will come into existence, especially in non-western democracies. Denmark also pushes back against their theory. They think capitalist structures are tied too tightly to liberal democracies for reform, so they focus their analysis on purely economic forces. This is not necessarily true—Denmark, a social democracy, has proven that liberal government institutions are effective in implanting successful climate policies and programs, directing capitalist forces towards a sustainable direction with major wind projects. The case of Denmark supports a strong welfare state, going against the intuition of Mann and Wainwright.

Theoretical Takeaways

Using Denmark, China, and the United States as units of analysis in dissecting these theories reveals several common threads that can help understand the current weaknesses of environmental political theory, why democracy is such a divisive topic within the field, and how it can better tackle issues of climate governance in the future. The cases reveal three main trends within all of the theories: environmental political theory is too broad in its scope, it must consider each nation and its governing

⁵³ Sengupta, Somini. "United Nations Warns of 'Catastrophic Pathway' With Current Climate Pledges." The New York Times, September 17, 2021, sec. Climate. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/climate/climate-change-united-nations.html>.

structures independently of others, and the theory owes it to the environmental movement to offer more specific solutions.

Environmental political theory is too broad

Willis, Shearman and Wayne, and Mann and Wainwright all argue their theories in a comprehensive, global context. Willis theorizes that increasing participation and democratic principles is the solution to the climate crisis but does not consider the recent strides authoritarian China has made in climate mitigation policies. On the other hand, Shearman and Wayne argue that liberal democracy is just a moment in history, and eco-authoritarianism is the only possibility to solve the climate crisis. This framework might strengthen the recent advances in China, but it completely ignores how democratic principles have made Denmark, a liberal democracy, the highest ranking country on the CCPI. Mann and Wainwright continue this trend by only considering capitalist societies and futures. Not every country is a capitalist country like the United States, weakening their argument due to its global focus. These blanket theories do not allow self-determination in governance and innovation. The authors speak of climate change as a universal understood by humanity, but this is far from the truth.

Take fossil fuel interests as an example of a major obstacle blocking effective climate action. Neither Willis, Shearman and Wayne, or Mann and Wainwright are able to effectively explain in detail how fossil fuels have amassed such a hold on democratic political systems like in the United States. Willis understands they are bad for democracy in general, but she is unable to address what specifically in American democracy is not allowing governmental processes to overcome the challenge. If a politician or bureaucrat looking to make a change were to read her theory, they would gain nothing that they did not already know. The same goes for the other two theories—Shearman and Wayne do not provide preconditions for a transition to authoritarianism and Mann and Wainwright talk about the different paths for future polities that they predict, but they do not offer specific guidance to nations and their unique circumstance. If environmental political theory is to help solve the climate crisis, it must use precise language and not leave room for speculation.

Theoretical analysis at the domestic level is necessary

Environmental theorists must not assume that a political solution for one nation will work in another nation. It is clear that democratic governance and civic participation has allowed Denmark to become a global leader in limiting carbon emissions and investing in sustainable infrastructure. As Povitkina's study shows, democratic institutions can advance positive climate policy, but that does not mean that they are the only possible solution. China is an authoritarian state that is currently implementing more effective climate policies than the United States, which can be seen in its ranking on the most recent CCPI. If an authoritarian regime is currently performing better than a democratic regime in lowering greenhouse gas emissions, then it is difficult to argue that authoritarian regimes do not also

have the potential to successfully mitigate emissions and avert catastrophic climate change. International dialogues from the Kyoto Protocols to the Paris summit have garnered mixed results, leading to little-to-no noticeable global changes. Theories must try to understand how each individual nation's governing structures may lead to a green future. Denmark deserves a danish political theory for itself that can help it embrace its democratic climate roots and use that to continue to successfully mitigate emissions. On the other hand, China is not a democratic state, making the chance of achieving sustainable governance through a democratic political revolution in an otherwise stable state unrealistic, and much too costly and timely.

If environmental theorists want to help countries lower greenhouse gas emissions, they must look at what countries need independently of one another because every nation has different existing strengths and weaknesses in tackling the climate crisis. Willis advocates for more democracy, but her framework is set up for ailing democracies, so in the context of China, it does not make very much sense. Shearman and Wayne provide an argument that fits well in a Chinese authoritarian concept but does not allow a state like Denmark to exist or even value its success in implementing successful climate mitigation policies. Continuing the trend, Mann and Wainwright talk about economic systems as if they are homogenous across nations, failing to recognize national differences. The bottom line is that not only are political theories too broad in their ideas, but the scale of the problem they attempt to solve is too expansive. To solve the climate crisis, we cannot expect a political theory that is a cure-all text. Instead, we must search for an intertwined network of political theories to push our governments to avoid catastrophic climate change: a theory specific to Denmark, another specific to China, a third focusing on the issues of the USA, and many more that specialize and understand the institutions of each individual nation around the globe. The political theorists of The Enlightenment and beyond led to a vast array of unique governmental systems, meaning that environmental political theory of today must recognize the diversity of governance moving forward.

Environmental political theory must emphasize urgency and provide guidance

As anyone interested in environmental political theory knows, the climate crisis is imminent and already here. Communities around the world are feeling the effects of climate change and we need political theories that do not make broad statements. Willis argues for more democracy but does not give a path for countries to end the control fossil fuel interests have on governing processes. Shearman and Wayne discuss why an eco-technocratic elite is necessary, but do not detail how a state should implement the new ruling class. Mann and Wainwright fall into this trap as well by not explaining how a new form of green capitalism will emerge quickly enough to prevent catastrophic climate change. As the previous point notes, theories leading to a political future that successfully confronts the climate crisis must be nation-specific, but they also must take the time to understand how politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs,

and citizens can work together and utilize the strengths of their own governmental structures to propel positive climate action forward.

If a politician in the United States truly wants to lead the charge in implementing climate policy, current environmental theory may provide inspiration, but there are no clear paths within it. As the first takeaway mentioned, environmental theory is too broad. And an important addition to that point is that it does not provide clear direction for governments to take moving forward. The writers of *The Enlightenment* had the pleasure of recommending grand ideas that nations could take and curate in their own unique ways over decades and centuries, but the climate crisis does not afford environmental political theory the same luxury—the effects of climate change are already here, so we must act now. Environmental political theory must respect theoretical approaches but place a greater emphasis on actionable items. Environmental political theories cannot only tell us only why fossil fuel interests are bad for implementing successful climate policy—they need to give governments, politicians, and communities actual steps they can take and regulations that they can implement to lessen their influence. Maybe it is a specific campaign finance law, or a bureaucratic institution with more influence, but whatever the theory may recommend, it must respect the urgency of the crisis at hand by detailing actionable steps nations can take to quickly and effectively lower emissions.

Conclusion

Willis, Shearman and Wayne, and Mann and Wainwright all lay out their ideas for a political theory that successfully confronts the climate crisis. Willis is a strong advocate for democracy, arguing for increased political participation from everyone as the solution. Shearman and Wayne present the antithesis of that argument, concluding that the only political hope for society is a form of technocratic eco-authoritarianism. Mann and Wainwright do not think our liberal institutions are capable of substituting the capitalist need for growth and profit, asserting that society must submit to a capitalist sovereign that determines the highest possible economic areas of growth and redefines it in sustainable terms. All three of these theories present unique arguments, while also contradicting one another. Using Denmark, China, and the United States—states of different political types with various levels of success in confronting the climate crisis—it is possible to see if these theories hold any truth in the real world and allow for conclusions to be drawn about the field of environmental political theory in general.

Denmark, the most successful nation in terms of implementing climate policy, supports Willis' argument that advancing democratic principles encourages positive. On the contrary, China, although it is still the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has made great advances in investing in sustainable projects and infrastructure over the past two decades, giving reason to believe that Shearman and Wayne's ideas on eco-authoritarianism are a valid strategy to mitigate climate change. The United States,

undeniably a liberal democracy, is unable to pass meaningful climate legislation due to entrenchment from fossil fuel interests, leading scholars like Mann and Wainwright to theorize that we must reform capitalism because our governing institutions are ineffective. All three of these theories potentially work in some cases, but discredit climate advancements from nations in others. Through these theoretical contradictions that Denmark, China, and the United States made clear, we can extrapolate several broad themes regarding environmental political theory. The first is that current environmental political theory is too broad—saying democracy works or does not work is unrealistic. Second, environmental theories must be local and specific to nations and their political systems—democracy might be the right path for Denmark, but Chinese authoritarian progress should not be discounted. Lastly, the urgency of the climate crisis requires more guidance and specificity from the field—how can a nation like the United States escape powerful fossil fuel interests? The cases of Denmark, China, and the United States provide a comparative analysis that necessarily critiques environmental political theory and helps the field understand how it can better assist the nations of the world achieve sustainable governance—at the domestic level and with or without democratic institutions, depending on the case at hand.

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