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# Entangled Futures: Big Oil, Political Will, and the Global Environmental Movement

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## Abstract

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified a lack of “political will” by national leaders as the main obstacle to mitigating the climate emergency in its 2022 report. However, the report makes no mention that contributing to this political deficiency has been rising antidemocracy over the past two decades, furthered by the support of the powerful fossil fuel industry. This article explores the synergy between antidemocratic leaders embracing anti-climate agendas that prioritize oil and gas companies over the rights of their citizens. I conclude by reflecting on possible responses to this bleak reality from members of the global environmental movement. This involves acknowledging the deep complicity of liberal democratic states in extractive capitalism, while also rethinking democratic principles of social equality and political inclusion to ensure that historically underrepresented communities can engage in emancipatory pro-climate political mobilization.

## Keywords

antidemocracy – anti-environmentalism – authoritarianism – climate emergency – environmental justice – fossil fuels – greenhouse gas emissions – inequality – political will

## 1 Introduction

In April 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Working Group III sub-report “Mitigation of climate change.” The report,

authored by hundreds of scientists and endorsed by the United Nation's 195 member nations, builds upon companion reports by IPCC Working Groups I and II and reflects worldwide consensus by scientists and governmental organizations on the present climate emergency. Together the reports make clear that burning fossil fuels is the primary cause of planetary warming and must stop immediately to avert going beyond 1.5°C and causing “irreversible” harm to human and ecological systems.<sup>1</sup> The reports also argue that technologies pushed by the fossil fuel industry, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS), “are unproven at scale, unavailable in the near term, are of uncertain benefit for the climate, and pose significant risks of harm to humans and nature” (CIEL 2022:4). However, the reports optimistically argue that pathways toward mitigation are available such as policies to reduce energy demand, replacing fossil fuels with renewables such as wind and solar power, and massively increasing electrification grids. These pathways are presented as scientifically sound and economically viable alternatives for transitioning to renewable energy (see, however, Dunlap 2021; Kramarz et al. 2021).

Despite the clear scientific consensus that fossil fuel dependency must stop immediately, the Working Group III report and its “Summary for Policymakers” downplayed this reality. Working against the earlier Working Group I and II reports, the latest sub-report emphasized techno-fixes such as CCS, projected long-term reliance on fossil fuels, and assumed temperatures rising over 1.5°C. As a result, its suggestions for mitigation were limited, citing lack of political will on behalf of governmental leaders as being a central obstacle to reducing global warming. According to an analysis by the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), this limited response reflected political and economic biases that “eclipses understanding of the possible ambitious pathways that limit warming to 1.5°C,” and in turn narrowed what future scenarios might be considered (CIEL 2022:12). In short, the unequivocal message to immediately stop burning fossil fuels in order to reduce planetary warming was obscured by vague language and scientifically unsound propositions.

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1 The IPCC reports, like almost all UN and intergovernmental science and policy reports, reflect a modernist state perspective firmly grounded in Euro-American power and Western logics of economic progress, state security, and national sovereignty. Representation of and participation by non-state actors, including civil society organizations and non-scientific communities, is limited. Even further limited is the participation of Indigenous and marginalized groups from around the world, particularly from the Global South. Despite Indigenous peoples being disproportionately impacted by the climate emergency, they are rarely involved in policy and decision-making that impacts their lives and livelihoods. Nor are they able to critique the intergovernmental policies decided on their behalf (see, for example, United Nations 2018).

Notably, in the days before the final release of the “Summary for Policymakers,” there were intense behind-the-scenes political pressures exerted by major emitting countries such as the US and Germany. These countries wanted to prioritize references to CCS as a possible solution, as well as the removal of references to the responsibility of rich industrialized nations to provide climate finance to poorer countries. There was also pressure for the removal of any reference to decades of disinformation campaigns by fossil fuel companies and their role in foiling climate action, as noted in Chapter 5 of the report.<sup>2</sup> These highly politicized negotiations “illustrates the growing tensions between the clear and urgent need to rapidly phase out fossil fuels and the reluctance of decision-makers to acknowledge or act on that need” (Ibid:5). As noted by commentators, “Politics is still getting in the way of climate science, even in a report that discusses the ways politics are getting in the way of climate science” (Grasso 2022:264; Teirstein 2022). Upon the delayed final release of the report, António Guterres, the UN Secretary General, tweeted to the world in frustration and despair, “The latest IPCC report is a litany of broken climate promises. Some government & business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another. They are lying. It is time to stop burning the planet” (Nuccitelli 2022).

In this article, I explore the wider context behind the intense negotiations to better understand the divergence between the IPCC Working Group I and II reports on the one hand, and the latest Working Group III report on the other. In a sense I pick up where the latter leaves off, examining more deeply why there is a lack of political will on behalf of governmental leaders. Specifically, I connect this leadership deficiency to a global wave of antidemocratic governance and rising authoritarianism that has emerged over the past two decades. While the Working Group III report does mention the negative side effects of a “politics of fear,” it does not explicitly reference rising antidemocracy and how it may be undermining “environmentally-responsible group behaviours” (IPCC 2022: Chapter 5, 32). I argue that oversight of this antidemocratic trend is significant, precisely because it weakens the “political will” the report identified as necessary for mitigating climate change. Moreover, it speaks to the reluctance in the report to focus on fossil fuels as a primary driver of the climate emergency.

In what follows, I examine the powerful fossil fuel industry and explore the collusion between oil and gas corporations with political leaders. This collusion has a long history, especially in the US. I then explore how this

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2 The reluctance to call out the fossil fuel industry was echoed earlier in the Paris Agreement (2016), which remarkably does not make a single reference to fossil fuels even as it sought national pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused primarily by burning carbon energy.

relationship has gained momentum more recently, coinciding with a global lean toward authoritarian governance. As I have written elsewhere, the two trends of escalating planetary warming and rising authoritarianism are interconnected (Darian-Smith 2022). Today more and more leaders are embracing anti-environmental laws and policies, which have become a key signature of far-right politicians and their party platforms. I conclude by reflecting on possible responses to this bleak reality from members of the global environmental movement.

I want to stress at the outset that while national leadership is essential, ordinary people are also indispensable for mitigating the looming environmental emergency. Political leadership – good and bad – doesn't operate in a social vacuum. As outlined in the call for the Earth Crisis Conference, there is an enormous diversity of people working on different, but interconnected, environmental justice issues and impacts around the world. These include a “wide array of social and environmental concerns that draws scholars and activists from an intersection of climate biodiversity, food, health, migration, racial, gender, social and global justice traditions and movements.”<sup>3</sup> In my view it is vital to harness the collective political will of the global environmental movement to aggressively target the fossil fuel industry, which is the primary driver of today's climate emergency. I suggest that talking about the devastating impact of fossil fuels must be present in all environmental justice conversations at whatever political scale and within whatever communities those conversations occur.

## 2 The Power of Big Oil

Oil, gas, and coal production is not the only source of planetary warming, but it is by far the major cause. According to the *Carbon Majors Report* (Griffin 2017), which collected data on greenhouse gas emissions by fossil fuel corporations, one hundred energy companies are responsible for producing 71 percent of greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 (the year the IPCC was established).<sup>4</sup>

3 The “Earth Crisis and the Global Environmental Movement” Virtual Conference took place August 9–13, 2022. It was co-hosted by the Global Studies Association of North America and the Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management program at The New School (see <https://event.newschool.edu/earthcrisis>).

4 Typically, data is collected at the national level to show each country's consumption of fossil fuels and respective production of greenhouse gas emissions. According to data from the Global Carbon Project, since the start of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century the US has emitted more carbon dioxide than any other country. The US, along with other

More specifically, the top-25 corporate and state-owned fossil fuel producers account for 51 percent of global industrial emissions (Starr 2016). This is a staggering reality, bringing into sharp focus the core source of the climate emergency and the primary obstacle in mitigating planetary warming.<sup>5</sup>

Coal, oil, and gas provides approximately 80 percent of the world's energy (Angus 2016; Malm 2016; Mitchell 2011; Pirani 2018). Historically, the fossil-fuel industry underpinned the rise of colonial and imperial European powers and the asymmetrical power relations that endure between the Global North and Global South. Today, the fossil-fuel industry continues to play an outsized role in the global political economy, being vital for almost all industries and manufacturing. Fossil fuels have brought private and state-owned corporations both enormous power and wealth. Notes one commentator:

At nearly \$400 billion, the oil industry alone makes up 3.8% of the world's economy. In the United States, oil companies generate just over \$180 billion in revenue each year and employ 9.8 million workers, accounting for 5.6% of all U.S. employment. The industry also ties into nearly every other industry, providing the energy to enable the production of goods (Kolmar 2022).

Regulating oil and gas corporations is not easy, given that the current system of climate governance exists within a neoliberal set of logics that have dominated the global order since the 1980s. These logics include deregulation, privatization, lower taxes for businesses, laws that favor employers over employees, de-unionization of labor, increasing inequality, and so on (Harvey 2007; Hickel 2018). Within this system:

states act mostly as agents concerned with their own economic interests and their world-wide competitive edge; corporations, on the other hand, besides being the primary economic actors, are important political agents with significant policy influence ... in particular oil and gas companies are major agents of climate governance (Grasso 2022:155).

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countries such as Australia, Canada and many in Europe, have together emitted more than half of cumulative global emissions despite representing about ten percent of the global population (see <http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/outreach>).

5 It is important to note that Big Oil is not a homogenous or monolithic group, and inter-company conflict can arise that may limit the industry's overall power to function as a block. That being said, the biggest international corporations collectively exert an enormous influence on the global political economy (Grasso 2022:154–158).

What this means is that oil, gas, and coal companies are very much involved in determining the rules governing their own drilling, mining, and fracking activities. So, it is hardly surprising that in the wake of the Paris Agreement in 2016, some companies indicated a future shift toward green energy and reparation for causing massive environmental degradation, but in practice very little has changed. According to a report by Big Oil International, the pledges and plans to reduce carbon emissions by eight of the biggest US and European oil and gas companies “are grossly inadequate” (Tong and Trout 2022:2). The big fossil-fuel companies continue to function largely unencumbered by rules of restitution, oversight, or accountability. And many of these companies aggressively seek to search for new reserve fields and promote new projects for investment that far exceed what the world can afford to burn in terms of de-escalating the climate emergency.

### 2.1 *Disinformation, Financial Contributions, and Industry Lobbyists*

In the late 1980s it became widely known that burning fossil fuels was linked to planetary warming. The fossil-fuel industry immediately roared into action and campaigned hard to dispel that information and sway public opinion in its favor. As has been well-documented by scholars and watchdog organizations, corporations and lobbyists have historically been very effective spreading disinformation about the realities of planetary warming (Darian-Smith 2022; Dembicki 2022; Hoggan 2009; Kramer 2020; Oreskes and Conway 2010). Climate-change denialism has been orchestrated on a global scale by the fossil-fuel industry, and companies like ExxonMobil have continued this strategy up to the present (Hall 2015). Notes Katherine Hayhoe (2021), chief scientist for The Nature Conservancy, oil companies and their lobbyists engaged in a wide range of deceptive activities including “Full-page ads in prominent newspapers, fake ‘grassroots’ campaigns, dark money-funded think tanks to promote bought-and-paid-for experts, legal firms to attack climate scientists to scare and silence them, [and] donations to politicians at every level of the political spectrum” (p. 138).

The fossil-fuel industry through its various executives, corporate networks, and lobbyists has worked its way into many domestic political systems in an effort to co-opt politicians to work on its behalf. This is very evident in the US, the world’s biggest producer of oil and natural gas. For over three decades fossil-fuel companies have made financial contributions to mostly Republican politicians who in turn have helped deregulate the industry and maximize its profits. Financial contributions have become increasingly important to many politicians who rely on these funds for their political campaigns and maintaining political power (Mayer 2017). With the passing of the contentious Supreme

Court decision “Citizens United” in 2010, unregulated financial contributions from oil and gas companies to conservative politicians have doubled (Naím 2022:63) (see Figure 1). And in return corporations have been well-rewarded, receiving big tax cuts under the Trump administration and a wide range of other government benefits. This included opening federal lands to new mining leases and giving the “fossil fuel industry between \$10.4 billion and \$15.2 billion in federal direct economic relief, while the Federal Reserve fueled a lending boom of more than \$93 billion in new bond issuances by oil and gas companies” (Grasso 2022:267) (see Figure 2).

Financial donations to political candidates are expected to balloon in the upcoming 2022 midterm US elections, and it is expected that over \$9.3 billion will be spent by federal candidates and campaign committees. Much of the money is being donated by multibillionaires such as Charles Koch who

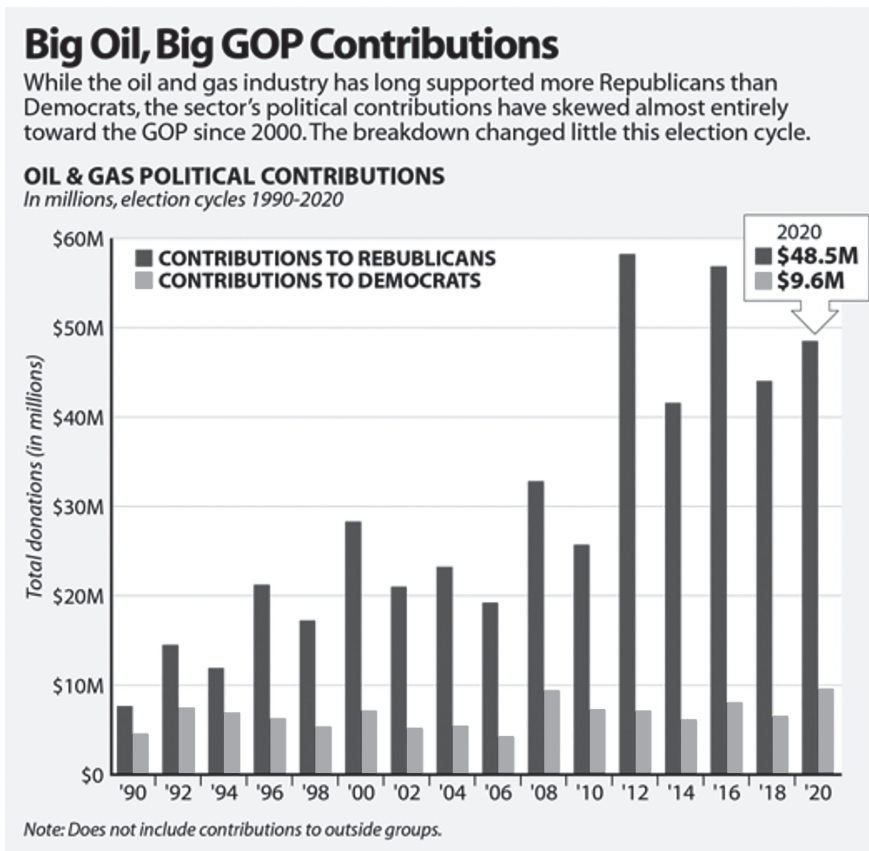


FIGURE 1 Oil and gas political contributions, 1990–2020  
 SOURCE: CITED IN KUSNETZ (2020)



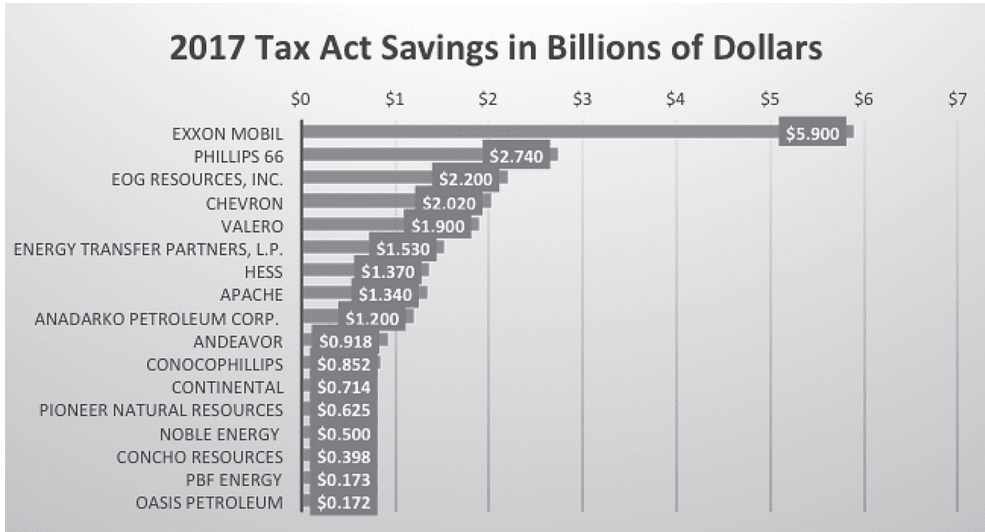


FIGURE 2 \$25 billion in oil company tax savings  
SOURCE: JUHASZ (2018)

controls the fossil fuel giant Koch Industries. Koch and other oil and gas executives are keen to support Republican candidates who spread the lie that the 2020 election was rigged and reinstate a Trump-led administration that will support their profit-making agenda.

However, attacking free and fair elections – one of the core principles of democratic systems – has caused much alarm among many commentators (Krugman 2022). While most of the Republican party has sided with Trump and fallen into line to promote his propaganda, some have not. For example, Jerry Taylor, a former vice-president of the conservative Cato Institute in Washington DC, said “Charles Koch has made his choice. This self-proclaimed voice of freedom and liberty has apparently decided that advancing the public policies he desires is more important than democracy” (quoted in Stone 2022). In a reference to the rise of fascism in Germany, Taylor continued, “[Koch’s] choice is not unlike the choices that most German industrialists made in the Weimar Republic” (Ibid).

In addition to financial contributions to politicians, the fossil-fuel industry also spends a great deal of money on industry-trade groups who lobby politicians and governmental agencies on its behalf. Lobbyists have become very prominent in recent years as a result of growing public awareness of the climate crisis and its link to fossil fuels. This shift in public opinion, supported by overwhelming climate-science consensus, has not stopped some politicians

such as Donald Trump calling the climate emergency a “hoax,” or some of the world’s most powerful executives, such as David Malpass, President of the World Bank and a Trump nominee, failing to concede that climate change is linked to nonrenewable energy (Gelles and Rappeport 2022). Despite such lingering climate denialism, fossil-fuel corporations are no longer able to rely upon propaganda and disinformation campaigns to the same degree as in the past. What has emerged as an alternative strategy is the aggressive targeting of pro-climate policies and environmental protections that reduce oil companies and investor profits. In 2019 alone, the five-biggest oil and gas companies spent \$201 million on lobbying politicians and agencies in efforts to defend the massively deregulated fossil-fuel industry (McCarthy 2019; Figure 3).

What the fossil fuel industry’s enormous financial contributions and lobbying points to is that in the US – and in many other countries – there is a massive struggle going on between pro and anti-climate factions. On one side are scientists, activists, citizens, and civil society and environmental organizations demanding governmental action to mitigate the climate emergency. On the other side is the powerful fossil-fuel industry that resists regulatory and legislative attempts to diminish its profitability. Currently corporations, and the political leaders they work with and through, are clearly winning the battle.

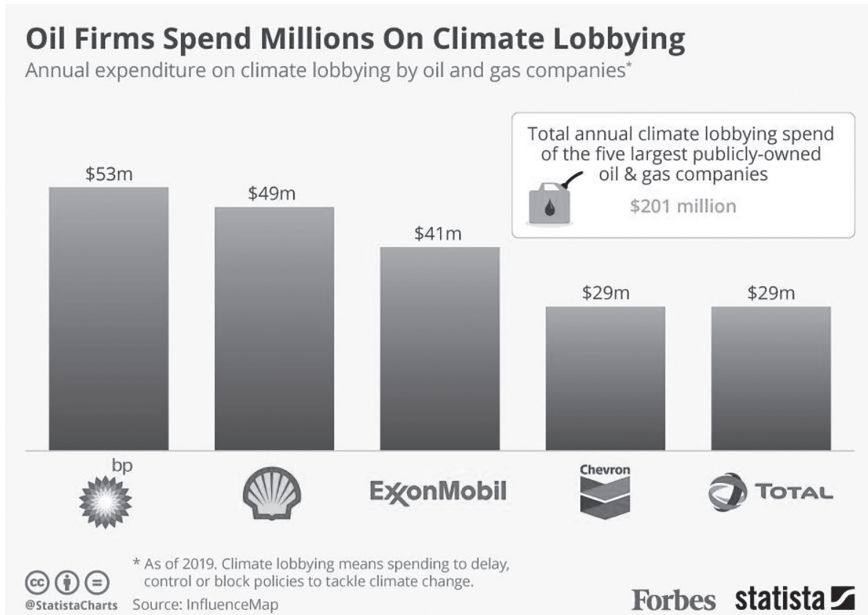


FIGURE 3 Total annual climate lobbying spend of the five largest publicly-owned oil and gas companies  
SOURCE: MCCARTHY (2019)

But the question remains, how does Big Oil continue to have such outsized impact, precisely when there is scientific consensus that burning fossil fuels is causing the climate crisis and there are emerging alternative renewable energy resources? If everyone knows that non-renewable energy is the biggest factor in escalating planetary warming, why is the IPCC modifying its scientific findings and submitting to the corporate manipulation of the fossil-fuel industry? Putting this differently, why are nearly two hundred nations allowing firms such as BP, Shell, ExxonMobil, and Chevron to compromise the health and wellbeing of their citizens? Why isn't there a surge in global political will and active cooperation to reject the status quo and demand a future based on sustainable renewable energy?

### 3 Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

To help answer these questions, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 offers some insights. In addition to the horrifying destruction of civilians, families, and livelihoods, Vladimir Putin shut down the Nord Stream pipelines that run under the Baltic Sea into Germany in retaliation to EU and US trade sanctions. This closing of energy access, and the subsequent sabotage of the pipelines, destabilized global energy supplies and caused rapid price escalation of gas around the world. Also disrupted were commodities and supply chains related to the export of Russian and Ukrainian grains (barley, wheat, and maize) and other food products such as sunflower oil. With the virtual halt of agricultural commodities, hunger and poverty dramatically increased around the world, particularly in places such as Benin, Egypt, and Sudan, which are heavily dependent on food imports.

Disturbingly, as many millions of people suffered directly and indirectly from Putin's invasion, oil executives made unprecedented profits capitalizing on a war that explicitly weaponized fossil fuels as a strategy of conflict. For example:

The top five oil companies alone – Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips – brought in more than 200 percent more in profits than in the first quarter of 2021. That is a total of more than \$35 billion in profits in just three months ... Instead of using this cash to make the investments needed to help lower the price of oil or to fulfill their climate pledges, companies are giving most of it back to their already extremely wealthy shareholders in the form of stock buybacks or giving it back to themselves in the form of executive bonuses. Last year, 28 of the top oil and

gas CEOs raked in \$394 million in compensation – a nearly \$45 million increase since 2020 (Hardin and Rowland-Shea 2022).

Notably, the windfall for the fossil-fuel industry will become even more pronounced over the coming years (as will the escalation of planetary warming). Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting shortage of Russian energy put pressure on many governments to expand mining and drilling to shore up their domestic reserves. This came at precisely the moment that some governments and a wide range of civil society and environmental organizations were talking about divesting from fossil fuels and transitioning to renewable energy production. What the Russian war has brought sharply into focus is a very efficient Big Oil industry that basically runs a carbon-energy monopoly upon which the global political economy depends.

This economic reality helps explain the lack of climate action and political will in the US under the Biden administration. Despite being elected to presidency on a pro-environment agenda in 2020, and passing the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 that injected \$370 billion into the economy to help transition away from oil and gas and toward renewable energy, the Biden administration has not lived up to its promise to reduce fossil-fuel extraction (Center for Biological Diversity 2022).<sup>6</sup> Arguably there is only so much that can be done when it comes to confronting the deeply embedded power of the fossil-fuel industry in the Republican party whose senate members voted unanimously against any pro-climate legislation. For example, Biden was forced to uphold the Willow project, a Trump plan that allowed extensive drilling on Alaska's North Slope to produce 100,000 barrels of oil a day for decades to come. But it was not clear why Biden also allowed crude oil to continue flowing through the Dakota Access Pipeline without a federal permit, undermining the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's treaty rights over land. And as catastrophic wildfires and storms bombarded the country throughout 2022, Biden refused to call a climate emergency under the National Emergencies Act. For the thousands of climate and environmental justice organizations, this apparent capitulation to oil and gas companies was bitterly disappointing. Wrote Juan Jhong-Chung from the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, "We need President Biden to take bold action now, and stand up to fossil fuel corporations that continue to undermine our democracy ... Everyone, no matter their race or zip

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6 In the political compromises made to ensure the passing of the Inflation Reduction Act, new mining and drilling leases are in fact mandated in the coming years (Department of the Interior 2022).

code, deserves to live on a planet where they can thrive!" (quoted in Climate Justice Alliance 2022).

However, for anyone concerned about the climate crisis perhaps the most disappointing action by the Biden administration was the opening up of oil and gas leases as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war's global impact on escalating fuel prices provided the political justification to ramp up fossil-fuel production as a matter of national security, further undermining efforts to decrease long-term dependency on fossil fuels. To off-set the renewed drilling agenda, Biden promoted a \$3.5 billion program to capture carbon pollution from the air (Department of Energy 2022). The success of this program is questionable given its purpose is to capture not remove carbon dioxide, and storage mechanisms remain scientifically uncertain. It should be noted that earlier findings of the IPCC reports found that such technology was uncertain and may in fact risk harm to humans and nature (CIEL 2022:4). As Friends of the Earth International argued:

The actors of these efforts are building an elaborate house of cards that is being used, along with the fairy tales of carbon-neutrality and fantasies of net zero fossil futures, to enable fossil-based capitalism to carry on unimpeded. A carbon-offset market can only lead to more warming, as it provides an excuse for continued emissions by the political and polluting elite (Stabinsky et al. 2022:11).

#### 4 Antidemocracy and Anti-environmentalism

According to analysts and many watchdog organizations, there has been a steady decline in democratic governments around the world over the past two decades (Boese et al. 2022; Csaky 2021). Writes one commentator:

[D]emocracy is declining more or less everywhere now. Not necessarily in every country but in every region, in rich and poor countries, old and new democracies ... The United States fits pretty cleanly into what is a now well-established global pattern of democratic backsliding ... This trend has really picked up speed, globally, only in the past twenty years or so (Hounshell and Fisher 2022; see also Bello 2020; Berberoglu 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Naím 2022).

Notably, this democratic backsliding is linked to anti-immigrant rhetoric, white supremacy, religious fundamentalism, and the reinforcement of world-views that promote national interests over global concerns such as the climate

emergency. And almost all far-right political movements galvanize their supporters with political slogans appealing to essentialized and romanticized nationalist ideologies – “Make America Great Again,” “Make Poland Great Again,” “Make India Great Again.”

Given the enormous profits and power at stake in Big Oil, it is not surprising that with the trend toward authoritarianism we are also witnessing the political embrace of pro-fossil-fuel agendas. The US under the former Trump administration exemplified this trend, rolling back fifty years of environmental-protection laws, issuing hundreds of new drilling leases, and opening national parks and federal lands to oil and gas companies (Darian-Smith 2022). The Republican party also introduced a range of ‘anti-riot’ laws that redefined what constitutes a ‘riot’ to include public protests of infrastructure such as gas pipelines being laid on public lands (Bayles 2021). In a report issued by the Institute for Policy Studies titled “Muzzling Dissent: How Corporate Influence over Politics has Fueled Anti-Protest Laws,” it was shown that fossil fuel companies “had made significant investments in lobbying around these laws” and had given large campaign donations to Republican legislators sponsoring the anti-protest bills (Steichen 2020).

Across Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, anti-environmentalism is fast becoming a signature of ultranationalist far-right parties and extremist politicians.<sup>7</sup> One result is that the stalling on climate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as well as the dismantling of existing environmental protections – including moratoriums on new mining leases – is increasingly commonplace.

For example, in Britain, the far-right Prime Minister Liz Truss (and former Shell executive) who came into office in September 2022 quickly overturned a ban on fracking and increased investments in North Sea oil and gas. She also appointed as her energy minister Jacob Rees-Mogg, a big opponent of climate action. In Italy, the far-right coalition led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni was also voted into power in September 2022. Very disturbingly, Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party has deep fascist connections. It has also historically opposed EU plans to reduce gas emissions, and there is widespread concern that like Truss, Meloni will implement an anti-climate agenda that favors oil and gas corporations. In Sweden, again in September 2022, the far-right party, the Sweden Democrats, was elected and Jimmie Åkesson became the new national leader. The Sweden Democrats have a deep association with white supremacy and

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7 Related to this is the mainstreaming of talk about ecofascism among scholars and across a range of social media platforms (Darian-Smith 2022:91–92; Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021; Roberts and Moore 2022).

was the only party in Sweden to oppose the ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2016 and push a climate-skeptic position (Klinkenberg 2022).

These new far-right and anti-environment leaders join a cadre of antidemocratic politicians already in power – or gaining power – in Hungary, India, Turkey, Philippines, Iran, China, Russia, France, Spain, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, and so on. As in the US, many of these countries have used state power to shut down public demonstrations against oil and gas companies and their polluting activities. In Latin America in particular, environmental justice advocates and land defenders are being criminalized and thrown into jail or targeted and killed. According to a Global Witness Report (2021), an independent organization that holds companies and governments to account for their destruction of the environment and related abuse of human rights, these violent activities are happening most often among small farming and Indigenous communities protesting their forced removal from the land (see also Temper et al. 2020).<sup>8</sup>

Around the world, in rich and poor countries, what we are seeing is a dangerous synergy emerging between Big Oil and a world-wide trend toward authoritarianism. Basav Sen (2021), a leading analyst of climate justice, argues that the fossil-fuel industry is increasingly turning to funding far-right leaders to defend and further its drilling and mining activities. Sen said:

As climate change intensifies and global opinion turns more and more against fossil fuels, the industry will resort to increasingly desperate measures to survive, including backing outright fascists who support their agenda. We need to dismantle this industry – with a just transition for the workers it employs and communities it buttresses – not just for the survival of our planet but global democracy as well.

I would add that in addition to fossil-fuel companies being forced to support authoritarian leaders, the recent wave of antidemocratic leaders finds it politically strategic to embrace the fossil-fuel industry and push an anti-environment agenda. It allows leaders to finance their political campaigns, push ultranationalist sentiment, ignore or delegitimize multilateral efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, implement anti-riot legislation and criminalize protesters and land defenders, impose harsh immigration policies, and increase police surveillance and control over their citizens – all elements common to today's various authoritarian regimes.

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<sup>8</sup> Global Witness reported that 54 green activists were killed in Mexico in 2022, making it the deadliest country for land and environment defenders in the world (Hines 2022).

## 5 Concluding Thoughts: How Should the Global Environmental Movement Respond?

In this article I have discussed the IPCC's latest report and its argument that a lack of "political will" by national leaders is one of the biggest obstacles to mitigating the climate crisis. What the report did not say is that this problem has been exacerbated by the global rise of antidemocracy and the emerging alignment of oil and gas companies with authoritarian leaders. Some of these leaders pushed to vet the "Summary to Policymakers" and remove references to the fossil-fuel industry's role in denying climate science and accelerating planetary warming. The end result was a missed opportunity to educate decision-makers and the wider public about the global fossil-fuel industry and its catastrophic impacts that are the primary driver of imminent ecological collapse.

Against this lack of communication, I suggest a multi-pronged approach for shifting the political will of leaders to engage with the climate emergency and specifically the impact of fossil fuels. This requires rethinking political agency both within and beyond the nation-state by subnational and nonstate actors. And it will necessarily involve transcending the Eurocentric biases that prioritize individualism, property rights, and progress as measured in capital accumulation. Not only do we need a different set of values and priorities that foregrounds humans over profits, we also need to embrace plural epistemologies and knowledge systems that include non-human actors and people's interconnected relations with them. According to environmental scholar Ayşem Mert (2019), "The Anthropocene is at once a crisis and an opportunity to rethink and (re-)construct democratic imaginaries, and correct some failures of the existing regimes." She goes on that it is precisely in our time of great uncertainty about the future, which often makes decisive action by authoritarian leaders appear attractive, that there is an "even more urgent need to demand deeply democratic procedures to be put in place and radically democratic regimes to be established at all levels" (Mert 2019; see also Agné 2010; Purdy 2015).

However, just how to establish radically democratic regimes is not clear. A suggested first approach is a conventional top-down strategy involving mainstream political and legal institutions associated with liberal democratic regimes. Of course, democratic governments historically were – and continue to be – complicit in the exploitation of natural and human resources in (neo)colonial and ecologically imperial contexts. The very notion of modern democracy was enabled through the extraction of oil, gas, and coal as Timothy Mitchell (2011) has powerfully argued, and oil-based forms of modern



democratic politics have become unsustainable. I agree with this assessment, but given the urgency of the climate crisis I think it is still essential to pursue immediate strategies toward building healthy and equitable democracies, notwithstanding historical and contemporary flaws in democratic political systems. In other words, societies need to aggressively demand representative government and leaders who are not working for fossil fuel corporations. Pro-climate leaders are vital for implementing domestic laws and policies, and building collaborations across national borders to mitigate ecological collapse. So, despite a global disillusionment in the idea of democracy itself, in the short-term, participation in electoral governance should not be dismissed. In fact, it could play a vital role in shifting political leadership and political will at the highest levels (Foa and Mounk 2015).

The second approach is complementary to the first. However, rather than focusing on national politics this could be a much more innovative approach that mobilizes cities, towns, regional organizations, and municipalities to push back against oil and gas companies and federal-level inaction on the climate crisis. For instance, Lytton, British Columbia, is a small town that was devastated by catastrophic wildfires in 2021 that spread throughout the province killing 619 people and causing tens of millions of dollars of damage. The City Council of Vancouver plans to sue fossil-fuel companies to recover damages caused by climate change, which directly contributed to extreme weather conditions resulting in raging wildfires and subsequent tornadoes and floods that further destroyed the region. Given the political power of Big Oil in Canada, if Vancouver's City Council is successful the case would be very significant for shifting responsibility for the climate crisis onto the fossil-fuel industry, which currently enjoys widespread immunity for its actions (Onishi 2022).

Vancouver's plans are in part inspired by the success of a legal action brought by Friends of the Earth Netherlands (Milieudefensie) and 17,000 co-plaintiffs and other environmental justice groups against the Shell corporation in 2021. In this case the judge held Shell liable for climate change and ruled it must reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by 45 percent within ten years. Noted Roger Cox, lawyer for Friends of the Earth Netherlands, "This is a turning point in history. This case is unique because it is the first time a judge has ordered a large polluting corporation to comply with the Paris Climate Agreement. This ruling may also have major consequences for other big polluters" (cited in Friends of the Earth Europe 2021).

In the US, approximately twenty legal actions by states, cities, and counties have mobilized to argue that the fossil-fuel industry is economically responsible for the impacts of climate change. Importantly, these lawsuits against big oil corporations are being heard at state and not federal levels (Mindock

2022). This is because the US Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative judicial majority (under Trump three far-right justices were appointed), and is very friendly to the fossil-fuel industry as demonstrated in a landmark decision that rolled back EPA regulations on carbon dioxide emissions titled “West Virginia v. Environmental Protection Agency” (2022). Given the highest legal authority in the country is essentially blocking pro-climate lawsuits for the foreseeable future, I anticipate that counties, cities, and municipalities will play a much larger role in pushing back against the fossil-fuel industry in the US. We are already seeing how these subnational actors are sharing legal strategies with each other as well as with their transnational counterparts.

The third approach is, in my view, the most important in terms of actively fostering over the coming years an alternative political imaginary that decenters the nation-state and includes the perspectives of people who have historically been marginalized and excluded from political processes. This is a bottom-up strategy calling upon grassroots environmental justice groups to talk about and educate their communities about the fossil-fuel industry. Instead of local environmental groups splintering off to focus on their most immediate issues, one strategy for building unity and effective action across a wide range of grassroots communities around the world is a clear and consistent focus on the destructive power of Big Oil and its local impacts. This is not about turning one’s back on immediate environmental concerns, but rather for activists (and scholars) to keep their eye on the bigger prize, which is to shrink the economic and political stranglehold of the fossil fuel industry.<sup>9</sup>

The global environmental movement can play a vital role in educating societies at all levels and among diverse groups by presenting a clear message about the catastrophic dominance of the fossil-fuel industry on human and non-human life. This would include speaking to climate justice coalitions, trade unions, students, health workers, zoning officials, agricultural and construction workers, university administrators, chambers of commerce members, local police, Indigenous communities, social media influencers – in fact all sectors of societies since everyone is directly and indirectly impacted by greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, this messaging should connect the rising power of the fossil-fuel industry to a decline in democratic principles,

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9 Of course, trans-local environmental justice groups have for decades been mobilizing across national, regional, and continental boundaries, learning from each other, sharing strategies and social media platforms. But too often environmental justice advocates get caught up (understandably!) in the particularities of their immediate local problems and can’t see the “wood for the trees.” Unfortunately, what tends to get lost in the conversation is the knowledge that one of the primary obstacles to mitigating the climate emergency is the enduring global dominance and reliance on fossil fuels.

underscoring that climate justice is only possible within equitable, inclusive, and pluralist societies.

These various approaches are collectively necessary and potentially impactful. All three approaches were evident in some form in the political organizing at grassroots, city, county, state, and national levels in Brazil that secured the narrow victory of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former leftist president, over authoritarian president Jair Bolsonaro in the early October 2022 national elections. While there will be a run-off election and the final outcome is uncertain, the fact that the electoral process could enable a radical change in government reaffirms the importance of inclusive democratic principles and reimagining how political and legal institutions could best serve majority interests. In terms of the environment, if Lula is elected President of Brazil, he has promised to reverse the devastating policies of Bolsonaro who came into power in 2018 on an explicit anti-environment platform.<sup>10</sup> The possible return of Lula to political leadership highlights that despite widespread threats of violence and racial and class intimidation by Bolsonaro's administration, it takes the political will of diverse sectors of society to participate in political processes to ensure responsible pro-climate leadership.

Moments of optimism such as Brazil's election underscore that what is needed to combat the powerful elitist partnership between the fossil-fuel industry and far-right politicians is a reassertion of political will among middle and lower classes, especially among those communities historically marginalized from political engagement. Igniting a new political imaginary that includes a plurality of ordinary people's needs, desires, and dreams of collective futures is at the core of this political strategy. Over the long term, radical political mobilization is also key to addressing the wide range of interconnected injustices raised by the global environmental movement.

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10 Specifically, Bolsonaro committed to clearing the Amazonian rainforest of trees, animals, small farmers, and Indigenous peoples and open it up to mining, grazing, and agribusiness (Darian-Smith 2022). As a result, the Amazon rainforest, often described as the "lungs of the world," has been dramatically burnt and depleted in recent years, causing global concern by environmental groups and climate scientists.

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