



Beyond 'deniers' and 'believers': Towards a map of the politics of climate change



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ABSTRACT

The politics of climate change is not concerned solely with rival scientific claims about global warming but also with how best to govern the climate. Despite this, categories in climate politics remain caught up in the concepts of the 'science wars', rarely progressing far beyond the denier/believer-dichotomy. This article aims to nudge climate politics beyond the polarized scientific debates while also counteracting the de-politicisation that comes from assuming scientific claims lead directly to certain policies. First existing typologies of climate political positions are reviewed. Diverse contributions make up an emerging field of 'climate politology' but these tend to reduce climate politics either to views on the science or to products of cultural world-views. Drawing on policy analysis literature, a new approach is outlined, where problem-definitions and solution-framings provide the coordinates for a two-dimensional grid. The degree to which climate change is considered a 'wicked' problem on the one hand, and individualist or collectivist ways of understanding political agency on the other, provide a map of climate political positions beyond 'believers' vs 'deniers'.

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1. Introduction

With its origins in climate science, the issue of climate change has often been considered in 'narrowly technical and reductionistic terms' (Demeritt, 2001, p. 312). Until the mid 2000s western media typically reported it 'as an evenly balanced debate between apparently expert groups who were "believers" or "deniers"' (Boykoff and Smith, 2010, p. 5) in 'the science'. This dichotomy, although it never reflected the complexity of the debate, coexists increasingly awkwardly with a much wider debate about what to do about climate change and how to engineer major organisational and societal changes. One observer even suggests that the denier-believer debate is being replaced by a debate about policy: 'politicians who flatly reject climate science are now being replaced by climate policy sceptics' (Hickman, 2013). Though 'denialism' persists, a great debate on how to govern the climate – what measures to use, precisely what goal to have, how to deal with effects of climate change and which policy instruments to

choose – has long been in train. The global climate is not just a scientific object but also a governance-object (Corry, 2010, 2013).

Despite this, the vocabulary used to identify climate political stances still rarely goes far beyond 'sceptic' and 'believer' – categories rooted in the debate about the veracity of scientific claims. Introductions to global warming usually side-step the politics, refer to those 'skeptical' or 'supportive' of the idea that humans are to blame (e.g. Maslin, 2008, p. 35) or only briefly touch on the 'politics of greenhouse' (Pittlock, 2009, p. 270). Policy literature typically covers physical climatology, economics and sometimes institutions, without elaborating on how ideologies or political dynamics might influence preferences and choices (e.g. Helm and Hepburn, 2009; Richardson et al., 2011; Stern, 2007; IPCC, 2001). Studies of public opinion on climate change similarly track attitudes to global warming (e.g. Brechin, 2010) but focus mainly on whether scientific claims are believed and how seriously global warming is viewed (see also Leiserowitz et al., 2006; Whitmarsh, 2011). More rare is survey data gauging support for specific policies such as taxation on energy and other forms of possible government action on climate change (Leiserowitz, 2006; Nisbet and Myers, 2007). One report suggested a six-fold division between the alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged doubtful and dismissive segments of American society (Maibach et al., 2009). However, this amounts to a more detailed breakdown of the same sceptic-believer continuum, reacting to 'the science'. Similarly, media

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studies have looked at how the media frame climate change, e.g. through rival 'scientific uncertainty' and 'climate crisis'-framings (Nisbet, 2009) that also revolve around trust in scientific claims. Others have examined how such framings of climate science play into familiar political cleavages, e.g. between Republicans and Democrats in the US (Boykoff, 2011; McCright and Dunlap, 2011a; Jenkins, 2011).

The politics surrounding the practice of climate science has not been ignored. Science and Technology Studies examines the 'scientisation' of climate politics (Demeritt, 2001; Van der Sluijs et al., 1998, 2010) as well as the politicisation of climate science including the role of right wing groups and US-based think tanks contesting scientific claims (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Hoggan, 2009, see also McCright and Dunlap, 2011b). International Relations scholars have offered typologies of different diplomatic stances, e.g. being 'leaders, pushers and laggards' in relation to a global agreement (Andresen and Agrawala, 2002), have analysed the role of actors such as the EU (e.g. Oberthür and Kelly, 2008; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013) or pointed to factors determining state stances. How do global political economy and national interests affect which states and non-state actors group together behind certain policies (e.g. Newell, 2006, p. 166)? Stripple and Bulkeley (2013) have expanded the purview of the study of international climate politics by collating analyses of governmental techniques designed to govern carbon and populations through regimes of knowledge and Corry (2013) argues that the emergence of the global climate as a governable object has a structuring effect on world politics as a whole.

Nevertheless, despite an ever-widening field, more often than not climate political reporting and analysis is strangely reticent on the variety of positions and the structure of political debate relating to governing climate change (exceptions are covered below). While the denier-believer debate still has serious political implications (see O'Neill and Boykoff, 2010; Hoffman, 2011), reducing the politics of climate change to this obscures some important issues and leads to a contradiction. On the one hand understanding the politics of climate change with the compass of the scientific debate imports the polarisations of the 'science wars' to the policy arena. For some groups, climate change policies are 'invented by self-interested and unpatriotic scientists and activists' (McCarthy, 2013, p. 23). At the same time a post-political framing conceals the politics involved, casting climate policy as a 'global humanitarian cause' that somehow flows logically from 'the science' (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 217). The paradox of consensus politics coexisting with science wars could thus be two sides of the same coin: 'the political nature of matters of concern is disavowed to the extent that the facts in themselves are elevated, through a short-circuiting procedure, on to the terrain of the political' (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 217, see also Machin, 2013).

This reflects a wider tendency in environmental political commentary to underestimate the 'ideological and social theoretical underpinnings of the environmental debate' (Manno, 2004, p. 156). For Hulme 'disagreements about climate change are as likely to reveal conflicts within and between societies about the ideologies that we carry and promote, as they are to be rooted in contrary readings of the scientific evidence' (Hulme, 2009, p. 33) and eck argued that 'climate politics is precisely not about climate but about transforming the basic concepts and institutions of (...) industrial, nation-state modernity' (Beck, 2010, p. 356). Yet categories and shorthands originating in the science debate continue to signpost positions on climate politics.

This article responds to this problem in three steps. In Section 2 we review existing typologies of positions in the politics of climate change. We ask what categories they offer and identify the key questions they organize their accounts of climate politics around. Bringing these together depicts the emerging field of 'climate politology' and its key challenges. Section 3 prepares the ground for a new map of climate policy positions, identifying two dimensions

relating to problem-definition and solution-framing: how 'wicked' the problem is viewed, and the degree to which individualistic/holistic perspectives underpin solution-definitions. A final section briefly assesses the new map in terms of what it tells us about the limits and focus of the existing typologies, what aspects of the politics of climate change have been overlooked by the sceptic-believer dichotomy and how the simultaneous politicisation of science and de-politicisation of policy can be challenged.

2. Surveying typologies of the politics of climate change

If the original point of observation was the first-order question of what is happening to the climate system, there are now a number of second-order observations (i.e. observations of 'the point that we are watching from when we observe "what is out there"' (Andersen, 2003, p. xi): observations of observations of climate change. These offer different lenses for understanding how people and groups take and defend positions on climate change. The picture is fragmented, however, and second-order observations vary in terms of what they find and refer to: ideal-typical positions, discourses, system logics or world-views of climate change, for example. Here we bring them together, probing what might be thought of as *climate politology*: the study of the politics of governing the climate, not as a purely either physical or social phenomenon (politology is 'a more unifying term concerning methods' (Dreijmanis, 1973, p. 360) compared to political science). This can in turn be thought of as a contribution to an emerging interdisciplinary field of *climate studies*. Social theory and studies of environmental politics increasingly refuse a sharp distinction between 'nature' and 'society' (Dunlap 1997; Goldman and Schurman 2000), most recently through the idea of an Anthropocene - a new Earth epoch where humans drive geological time. As well as referring to geophysical transformations, Anthropocene is also considered a 'global political phenomenon' (Biermann, 2014, p. 57). Climate politics and the study of it has become 'part of an ongoing extension and deepening of combinations, confusions and 'mixtures' of nature and society' (Beck, 2010, p. 256) and we suggest 'climate politology' has the potential to be at the forefront of this process.

We begin with the epistemically most limited claims:—an 'ideal type' is just an analytical construct used to decode complex reality (Watkins, 1952; Weber, 1973), whereas at the other extreme, cultural 'world-views' refer to frameworks of meaning in (and across) societies, that supposedly actually affect how people understand themselves and the world around them (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

2.1. Ideal-types in climate politics

One strategy is to expand upon the sceptic-believer dichotomy. Anthony Giddens (2009) offers three ideal-typical positions: the 'sceptic' who believes we are living in an age of scares and that global warming is one of them; 'radicals' who focus on risks as opposed to the opportunities of climate change and take the worst case of runaway global heating as the basis for prudent action; and a third 'mainstream' position which is treated as broadly synonymous with the work of the IPCC (2007). Giddens also allows for sub-categories within both the sceptical and radical camps, in the latter case between those who believe meaningful mitigation efforts are still possible and appropriate (such as James Hansen), and those who do not (such as James Lovelock). We consider these to be 'ideal-types' because they abstract from a more complex reality in order to sharpen understandings (rather than claiming to be accurate or exhaustive descriptions of real-world phenomena). As Max Weber had it, ideal-types bring together 'a great many diffuse and discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual events' into a 'unified analytical construct' (Weber, 1973, p. 191).

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